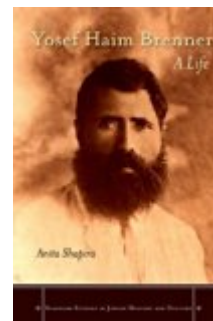


**Anita Shapira.** *Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 489 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-8527-3.



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Anita Shapira approached the task of writing her biographic work on Yosef Haim Brenner (1881-1921) as a very experienced historian of the Zionist movement. Unlike the figures depicted in Shapira's previous biographies,[1] Brenner did not hold any official position in a political party, nor was he a Zionist political leader. Moreover, much like today, during his lifetime, Brenner's literary works were known to but a chosen few. His remarkable status among the Hebrew writers may have more to do with his personal biography. Yosef Haim Brenner was born in Novi Mlini, a small town in Ukraine, in 1881. After several years of wanderings between Russia, London, and Galicia, he finally settled in Palestine in 1909 and stayed there until his tragic death in 1921 during the Jaffa Riots. These biographic milestones, without even referring to Brenner's unique persona, on which I will elaborate immediately, may explain Shapira's choice to dedicate her third biographical work to this writer in particular.

Shapira's biography on Brenner, first published in Hebrew in 2008 and later translated into

English in 2015, remarkably covers every possible aspect related to Brenner's life: it describes in detail the historical reality of the early decades of the twentieth century in Europe and Palestine, and discusses psychological aspects of Brenner's personality, his private life, as well as social relationships. Clearly, such a survey attests to Shapira's thorough and extensive research, and it definitely provides a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on Brenner and on the dramatic times in which he lived. Each one of the book's chapters deals with a distinct period in Brenner's life and career, presenting a comprehensive groundwork for future research, both on Brenner's activity and on his historical-cultural reality.

Interestingly, the most illuminating chapter of this book is probably the last chapter--"De Mortuis"--which does not deal with Brenner's life but is dedicated to Brenner's posthumous influences. In this chapter Shapira discusses the historical construction of the Zionist myth of Brenner "the saint." "Saint" and "myth" are terms presented by

Shapira herself, as she explores the practices of Brenner's commemoration in the Zionist Labor party. In this context it is worth mentioning that Shapira had initially addressed her book to the Hebrew-speaking, Israeli audience, in a social sphere where the name "Brenner" is known to almost everyone, while his works are practically forgotten. Many are familiar with different tales describing Brenner's exalted poverty and wretchedness. Thus, for example, Shapira brings a story about how Brenner once met a man who owned eight pairs of trousers, something which aroused Brenner's agitated exclamation, "How can one person own eight pairs of trousers!" There are many other stories such as this one, describing how, for example, during his stay in London in the years 1906-07, Brenner "carried the torch" of Hebrew literature when he edited, printed, and published in impossible conditions the only Hebrew literary periodical of the time--*Ha-Me'orer*. Shapira also describes how Brenner disdained possessions of any kind and even gave away every book he owned immediately after reading it. There are famous descriptions of his ascetic character, his avoidance of intimacy with women, and his sexual, unrealized attraction to other male writers. These are probably the ideal materials to constitute the mysterious icon of the modern saint.

Despite this vibrant presence of Brenner's cultural persona in Israeli discourse, Brenner's myth did not attract serious scholarly attention prior to Shapira's book, and for this reason too, this work is a major contribution. In an attempt to clear up the mystery surrounding the Brennerian icon, Shapira mentions the dominant figure in nineteenth-century Russian literature, the *yurodivi*—the holy fool—which, according to her, influenced greatly the formation of Brenner's popular image. Indeed, the figure of *yurodivi* suits, at least partly, Brenner's ascetic image and his celebrated wretchedness and poverty. Shapira demonstrates how influential these conceptions of the tormented prophet were within the social and cultural cli-

mate of the 1920s, as well as later on. For example, the last episode in the book includes an anecdote concerning two Zionist Labor party members, Yehuda Shertok and Berl Katznelson. Katznelson came to see Shertok for a condolence visit in 1940 as the latter was engulfed in sorrow and deep grief following the tragic death of his wife and sister in a car accident. Just after this visit, it is said that Shertok appeared in a clean white shirt with a friendly look on his face. When Shertok was asked what he had been doing with Berl, he replied: "We read Brenner." This incident clearly demonstrates the crucial role of Brenner's iconic symbol of despair and agony. It is as if the deepest grief and depression associated with Brenner the man, with his tragic destiny and with his agonized heroes, magnified the private griefs and tragedies of the community members, thus purifying and redeeming them. The rumors, tales, and practices of Brenner's canonization and commemoration presented by Shapira provide fertile ground for future analysis of the "Brennerian function" in the history of Zionism, and at the same time present an extraordinary case study for the analysis of modern martyrology. The historical episodes collected by Shapira help acknowledge the model of "the neglected," "the wretched," and "the victim," and its immense influence in the process of cultural formation of the sovereign Jewish subject, and emphasize the inseparability of "sacred history" from "secular modern history."

Shapira's concern with the Israeli Brennerian myth brings me to consider the ambiguity of Shapira's own position as a historian of the Zionist movement. Although Shapira explores the cultural origins of the myth, her book in fact contributes to its reconstruction and reaffirmation. Suffice it to point to the figurative language with which Brenner is depicted by Shapira; once as the "*hidden Tzaddik*," "a righteous man" (p. 167), and another time as "one of the few whose feathers were not scorched by Palestine's burning sun" (p. 169). One can also detect the trickling of oriental-

ist descriptive patterns into the historical depictions of the time. When Shapira speaks of Tel Aviv's early days, for example, she writes that "A few [Jewish] neighborhoods in Jaffa such as Neveh Tzedek and Neveh Shalom had already set themselves apart from the narrow, filthy alleys [of the Arab city]" (p. 173). Shapira's historical method, with its tendency to blur tensions and conflicts, conceals some of the dramatic controversies in which Brenner's life and work were originally rooted. Brenner's murder belongs to the all-too-long history of the Zionist-Arab conflict and it was a highly influential moment in that history. Commemoration of Brenner tended towards mystification of his murder, as one can see when reading the laments for Brenner included by Shapira, and he was depicted as the victim of some force majeure rather than of specific political circumstances. Naturally, such rhetoric contributed to the preservation and naturalization of the political struggle. Shapira's work partly follows this path when she avoids discussing the critical controversies related to Brenner's ideology in his specific historical context (for example, Brenner's problematic relation towards the Palestinians among whom he lived in Jaffa and Jerusalem; his views of Jewish history, nationality, and sovereignty; or his depictions of the Jewish body and sexuality).

One problem preoccupied Brenner as a writer throughout his life: the fundamental opposition between art and society. In his literary works, Brenner constantly reflects on the tension between individual artistic expression and the collective demand addressed to the artist. This tension holds the inner logic of Brennerian work, and it is resolved in its literary style and form. Brenner was probably the greatest deconstructionist of his time; his artistic skill was his heretical impulse, his constant tendency to transgress the rules of the official, established discourse, and to rebel against the normative language, its grammar, syntax, and structure. In this sense Shapira's book accomplishes something Brenner himself

never did: it reunites the individual story with the national history, and reconciles the "underground man" with the collective demand.

#### Note

[1]. Anita Shapira, *Berl: The Biography of a Socialist Zionist, Berl Katznelson, 1887-1944*, trans. Haya Galai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and *Yigal Allon, Native Son: A Biography*, trans. Evelyn Abel (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2008. Her latest, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014) appeared after the 2008 Hebrew version of Brenner's biography.

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