

The Unhomely in the Literature of S. Yizhar

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the representations of the Israeli home in the writings of the prominent Israeli writer S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky, 1916–2006). Although the concept of the new Jewish home as the symbol of the Zionist metamorphosis is a major theme in Hebrew literature, Yizhar’s fiction contains few descriptions of houses and people’s homes, and he remains detached from, and skeptical about, this rhetoric and ideology. A sense of “uncanny strangeness” (Kristeva), which undermines the very idea of homecoming, imbues his rare, yet highly significant images of the home. This essay investigates Yizhar’s magnum opus *Yemei Ziklag* (1958) in conjunction with his autobiographical novel *Mikdamot* (1992), both of which present detailed descriptions of Jewish and Arab houses, portraying their material and symbolic instability and the threat they embody, thus associating unhomeliness with the problematics of Jewish-Arab coexistence. The essay points to *Yemei Ziklag*’s intertext, the story of King David’s escape to the city of Ziklag, with its own figure of the instability of the home, as the primal scene in a chain of Yizharian depictions of homelessness, at the core of which lies the recognition that no home is safe and that today’s home may well become tomorrow’s ruin (and vice versa).

EPHRAIM, THE PROTAGONIST of the debut novella by the prominent Israeli writer Yizhar Smilansky (S. Yizhar), “Ephraim Goes Back to Alfalfa” (1938), is the first in a series of characters in the author’s work to embody the tension between the individual and the group.¹ From the perspective that is the main concern of the present essay—the representations of the Israeli home in Yizhar’s oeuvre—what is striking is that during the long hours portrayed in the novella, Ephraim is situated outside the site that represents the very heart of kibbutz life and constitutes an emblem of the new home being built by the Jewish pioneers in Israel’s

¹ S. Yizhar, “Ephraim hozer la-aspeset” [Ephraim goes back to alfalfa], *Gilyonot* 11–12 (1938).

nation-building era: the kibbutz dining hall. As the story opens, Ephraim approaches the creaking door of this site, where the practices that shape collective life are realized and where his request to change his work assignment is being deliberated, only to beat a hasty retreat. He then spends the entire evening sitting on the ground with his back against the hall's outer wall, overhearing snippets of conversation through the open window. When he finally steps inside, his gaze remains fixed on the starry sky visible through this window, an image that has great symbolic importance in the text. Simultaneously an insider and an outsider, Ephraim thus places himself in a liminal position that foretells the complexity of the experience of the Israeli home in Yizhar's subsequent writings: on its threshold, close to its wide-open entrance, sometimes inclining inward and sometimes out.²

Born in 1916 in the experimental Hulda agricultural farm, Yizhar already reveals in this first novella his distinctive attachment to the open spaces of Israel/Palestine as well as to the land's flora and fauna, which figure prominently in his later fiction. Indeed, Yizhar's works contain few descriptions of houses and people's homes, maybe because they would disrupt the romantic fantasy of the pristine, natural landscape. In what follows, I explore the liminal and unhomey characteristics of the Israeli home in Yizhar's literary work. I argue that the author's ambivalence toward the home in this early story is echoed in his major later works in a variety of forms, which nevertheless allude to a similar causality.

With the rise of Jewish nationalism in the late nineteenth century, Hebrew writers were committed to, and deeply involved in, the project of national revival. This ideological endeavor began with a fierce negation of Jewish life in the diaspora, and in particular the Jewish habitat. The greatest writer of the period, Shalom Abramovitch, who wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish, portrayed the Jewish environment in the shtetl as mired in filth. Yahil Zaban has vividly described his grotesque depiction of daily existence in such surroundings: "When Jews sleep, the bedbugs in their beds 'sting and stink and decay [...]. When they rise from their sleep and talk to each other, 'their voices emerge from unwashed mouths and mucus-filled throats [...]. And when they eat and drink, they defecate not in a hidden and secluded place, but on the very threshold of the house, because '[it] is a custom to increase the sewage by the door so that the pigs will come and drown to their ears [...].'"³

As a redemption from this chaotic and degenerate diasporic home, symbolizing the political homelessness of the Jews, Zionism sought to establish a Jewish homeland, which, as Theodor Herzl envisaged in his *Altneuland* (1902), would feature orderly urban planning, beautiful neighborhoods, and aesthetic houses. The ideology of the new Jewish home permeated Zionist discourse from *Altneuland* onward, culminating in the definition of the State of Israel, in its 1948 Declaration of Independence, as a "National Home." Accordingly, the figure of the home as the embodiment and symbol of the Zionist metamorphosis is also a major theme in Hebrew literature.

Nevertheless, this Zionist discourse on the home, with its slogan "to build and be built" — taken from the popular pioneers' song, "Anu banu artza" (We came to our land) — is absent from Yizhar's prose. Despite his long-standing political activism and dedication to

² For a discussion of this position, see Iris Milner, "Agitated Orders: Early Kibbutz Literature as a Site of Turmoil," in *One Hundred Years of Kibbutz Life: A Century of Crises and Reinvention*, ed. Michal Palgi and Shulamit Reinharz (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 159–72.

³ Yahil Zaban, "Afrurit ha-helmon': Likhluh u-melankholiah be-yetzirato shel S. Y. Abramovich" [Stains of egg yolk and kugel fat: Hygiene and melancholia in S. Y. Abramovitch's fiction], *OT: A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 3 (2013): 44.

journalistic and pedagogical writing, his fiction always remained detached from, and skeptical about, the rhetoric and ideology of the Israeli home. In two of his war stories, “Sipur Khirbet Khizeh” (Khirbet Khizeh) and “Ha-shavui” (The Prisoner), this skepticism is tightly linked to the ghostly presence of the Arabs expelled from their homes in 1948.⁴ The war stories are said to represent Yizhar’s painful disillusionment with his pre-1948 vision of harmonious Jewish-Palestinian coexistence, as reflected in his choice to write primarily about the pre-state period, which ended with the Palestinian Nakba. Even when he returned to the literary arena in the 1990s, after thirty years of silence, most of his works were autobiographical novels, devoted to the lost era of his childhood and youth. In these later works, the home is indeed marked by an “uncanny strangeness,” as Julia Kristeva defines the Freudian *Unheimliche*.⁵ Interestingly, it is an uncanniness associated from the outset with the impossibility of Jewish-Arab coexistence—or perhaps retrospectively constructed as such.

The current discussion focuses on unhomeliness in two of Yizhar’s major works: the novels *Yemei Ziklag* (Days of Ziklag) (1958) and *Mikdamot* (Preliminaries) (1992).⁶ *Yemei Ziklag* recounts an unnerving encounter by Israeli soldiers in the 1948 war with the empty homes of the expelled Arabs; *Mikdamot* follows Yizhar’s much later emplotment of home and homeliness in his childhood, in the houses and neighborhoods where he lived, all adjacent to Arab houses. While the discussion will proceed chronologically, starting with *Yemei Ziklag* and proceeding to *Mikdamot*, the later work moves backward from 1948 to Yizhar’s childhood in the 1920s. The encounters with the abandoned Arab houses of the northern Negev during the battles in 1948, scattered throughout *Yemei Ziklag*, are a stage on which the rapid process of accommodation to the new reality unfolds. The process culminates in the closing lines of this 1,156-page novel with the narrator’s succinct observation that the Arab shacks have become the new home of the Israeli soldiers. However, the novel’s closure foregrounds the uncanniness of the dispossession of Palestinian homes. *Mikdamot*, which describes the author’s numerous displacements in his childhood from

⁴ S. Yizhar, “Ha-shavui” [The prisoner], in S. Yizhar, *Sipur Khirbet Khizeh* (1949) (Tel Aviv: Zmora, Bitan, 1959), 79–96; S. Yizhar, “The Prisoner,” in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter, trans. V. C. Rycus and Robert Alter (New York: Behrman House, 1975), 294–310; S. Yizhar, “Sipur Khirbet Khizeh,” in *Sipur Khirbet Khizeh*, 31–78; S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2008).

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 182 [originally *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard Education, 1991)]. The concept of *das Unheimliche*, articulated by Freud in his famous 1919 article, has been extensively referred to in literary research, particularly in its relation to the estrangement and defamiliarization effect of literature. See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Macmillan, 1999 [1919]), 218–53. Historicizing its origin, Anthony Vidler, in his book *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), discusses the cultural context within which it emerged, namely, the fin-de-siècle bourgeois environment. The home (*Heim*), which was the ultimate signifier of bourgeois society of the time, was in danger of collapse as a result of profound social and historical change. In fact, already in the Gothic-Romantic literature that Freud was intimately familiar with, the home is always potentially threatening, sickness and death being an intrinsic part of its everyday life. These problematic aspects of the concept are therefore at the core of the experience of home as Freud imagined it. Indeed, a major event in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” in relation to which Freud originally suggested the term, is the violent death of the protagonist’s father behind a closed door in the house. The standard English translation of *das Unheimliche*, “the uncanny,” loses this dimension (as does the standard translation into Hebrew), hence Vidler’s usage of the term “unhomely,” which the present essay adopts.

⁶ S. Yizhar, *Yemei Ziklag* [Days of Ziklag] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1958); S. Yizhar, *Mikdamot, Sipur* [Preliminaries: A story] (Tel Aviv: Zmora, Bitan, 1992); S. Yizhar, *Preliminaries*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2007). All references in this essay are to this translation.

one home to another, reveals the importance of this early period for the germination of Yizhar's sense of unhomeliness, shedding new light on his empathic stand toward the expelled Arab villagers in 1948. Thus, as the following discussion will demonstrate, Yizhar's literary works undermine the very idea of homecoming which is so dominant in any trend within Zionism. The unease with the Israeli home these works convey can be traced back to his first protagonist, Ephraim, who remained seated on the threshold of this home.

YEMEI ZIKLAG — THE HUSHA AND THE MILITARY POST

Yemei Ziklag, published in two volumes in 1958, describes seven days of battles on a hill in the northern Negev in October 1948, closely adhering to actual historical events. The battles took place two weeks before Operation Yoav, which broke the Egyptian siege on the southern part of the country. Overlooking a makeshift airport set up by the Israeli army, the hill's strategic importance brought both Israeli and Egyptian forces to fight over it.⁷ The residents of a small Arab village located on the hilltop—simple farmers from south of Mount Hebron, tagged “the locals” in the soldiers' jargon—inadvertently find themselves under fire, although they are not involved in any way in the fighting. However, the young Israeli soldiers, the mythological heroes of *Yemei Ziklag*, shelled ceaselessly by the Egyptian army, force these locals to escape, positioning themselves in their stead.

The village, which remains nameless in the novel, is in fact a small Arab settlement called Khirbet Makhaz.⁸ *Yemei Ziklag* pays particular attention to the actual houses of the village. Self-consciously and deliberately, Yizhar's novel problematizes the legitimacy of their takeover. Nevertheless, and although Yizhar has often been viewed as advancing a romanticized outlook on Israel/Palestine, his representation of the Arab houses is by no means adulatory. The few single-room hovels (*husha* in Arabic), made of clay bricks, animal dung, and straw and plastered with mud, are rural Arab houses, well known to historians of Palestinian/Israeli architecture.⁹ The soldiers describe them as “dirty smelly cubes.” After expelling the original owners, they gradually begin a process of appropriation and transfer of ownership. Thus, the novel gives voice to a double stance by foregrounding both presence and absence, home and homelessness, familiarity and unfamiliarity. Initially, the Arab hovels are “other people's homes.” Eventually, the sense of estrangement is warded off by embracing an alternative narrative of belonging; a seemingly

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the correspondence between historical facts and their literary representation in the novel, see Gidi Nevo, “Shivah yamim ba-Negev: Al 'Yemei Ziklag' le-S. Yizhar” [Seven Days in the Negev: On *Days of Ziklag* by S. Yizhar] (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2005). See also Nitza Ben-Dov, “My Imaginary Offspring: Reality and Fantasy in *Days of Ziklag* by S. Yizhar and in *If There is Heaven* by Ron Leshem,” *Hebrew Studies* 50, no. 1 (2009): 185–94.

⁸ Although the village of Khirbet Makhaz does not appear on the maps of the erased Palestinian villages, it is mentioned in historical accounts of the events. Moreover, there is a small village with an almost similar name, Khirbet Majaaz, located about twenty kilometers eastwards, in south Mount Hebron, which may be related to the erased village on the hill. Today there is no trace of the original village, apart from some stone foundations of the houses' walls and the Hebrew name Ma'ahaz Interchange, given to the southern exit from Route Six (*ma'ahaz* meaning “stronghold” in Hebrew).

⁹ For the *husha*, see Rassen Khamaisi, “Transition from Ruralism to Urbanization: The Case of Arab Localities in Israel,” *Horizons in Geography* 79/80 (2012): 166–183, esp. 177. Simple houses in Arab villages were usually built as small windowless cubes made of stones. A one-room rural Arab house was internally separated into two distinct spaces via an elevation of a part of it. See Ron Fuchs, “Ha-bayit ha-aravi ha-eretz yisre'eli: Iyun mehudash—helek 1: Ha-bniyah ha-kdam ta'asiyatit [The Palestinian Arab house reconsidered—part 1: The pre-industrial vernacular],” *Cathedra* 89 (1998): 83–126, esp. 83–92.

successful suppression of the homes' uncanny foreignness culminates in a newly formed attachment to a place that was formerly identified as "out of bounds," "not ours."¹⁰ Contrary undercurrents, however, never cease to undermine any prospect of a stable homeliness.

Initially, the hovels are described only from the outside. As the soldiers advance toward the site they are tasked with conquering, labeled "hill 244," what they perceive is "a clay hovel whose open door testifies to its history" (23). Later, when they find themselves among the typical features of an Arab village—prickly pear shrubs, an orchard, small plots of cultivated land on terraces—they see two more hovels, which they regard as nothing but box-like structures randomly scattered on the ground. This external perspective obscures the concrete signs of life that can be discerned in the other houses that appear along the way, all of them made of local materials, painted in the murky brown colors of the earth, and burnt in its oppressive heat. As they station themselves on the hilltop, however, the soldiers finally gain a closer look at the architecture of these so-called "boxes": the unhewn stones, the mixture of small stones and mortar that fills the spaces between them, and the roofs that are built of *aziva*—a blend of stones, reeds, and mortar used to plaster ceiling beams in local houses (252). Only the entrances are more sophisticated, with vaulted doors (263).

The soldiers' detached and estranged gaze is thus replaced by intimate observation, triggered by the operational necessity to position themselves within a protected space. The houses' interiors, containing evidence of the living habits of their inhabitants, evoke intense reactions of disgust and repulsion, apparently caused by the stink of *tabun* oven smoke and animal dung, but also, perhaps, by the soldiers' uneasy sense of trespassing. Indeed, the *tabun* oven continues to "smolder and give out an alien incense" (*rammotz ve-kater zarut*) (66–67) throughout the hundreds of pages of *Yemei Ziklag*. Once inside, the soldiers conceive of the houses as black holes and the domestic utensils as gulping cavities: "a large, black, upside-down *jarra* [pitcher], its jaw yawning in desolation" (66–67); "a gaping mouth with a dark ring of stones [...] (be careful not to fall into it at night)" (27). The surrounding poverty triggers astonishment, which is immediately transformed into hostility and aggression. ("The hovels, as usual, are somewhat expressionless and orphaned, deserving of nothing but a kick perhaps, and their wretchedness should cease to irritate" [23]). The density of those dark, windowless spaces—shared accommodation for humans and beasts alike—is perceived as a sickening chaos. The horror persists even as the soldiers encounter a somewhat more sophisticated version of the rural Arab house, in which several hovels are joined together around an inner courtyard that is used as a baking and cooking area, with separate wings for animals and people. These are all described as not only stinking, but also, again, "terribly foreign and uninteresting [...]" (27). The uncanny strangeness, wrapped in a protective barrier of indifference, seems to be a direct response to actual traces of the original owners, such as coals that are still smoldering under charred pots and colorful bedding that is spread out in the dark rooms (31).

Against the background of this reluctance and disgust, the soldiers long even more for their own homes, located far away from the desert, in the green and fertile northwest of the country. Nonetheless, they realize that the very hovels they despise are other people's lost homes and are just as desirable for them: "Where is their 'home' now? And isn't this their home? [...] To me, these are just musty-smelling-shacks, and there are some people—how strange—for whom this is the heart of their world and home [...]" (52). Self-reflective questions about the narrative of

¹⁰ Yizhar, *Yemei Ziklag*, 21. (Further references to this novel will be placed within the text.)

ownership are, however, placed in parentheses, indicating an attempt to suppress them: “Come on, go home!’ Pinile roared (and recognized again in a dazzling insight: where is their home? Not here?)”; or, regarding the lessons to be learned by the Arabs: “how one should not mess with the Jew or hang around these hovels of ours (ours? really ours? since when?)” (137).

The national and ideological narrative of Jewish return, which marks the land as the historical home of the Jewish people, is embodied in the novel’s title, *Yemei Ziklag*, and in the first depiction of the Arab houses on the hill. As described in the Bible, Ziklag, a Philistine town in which David found refuge when he fled from King Saul, was destroyed by the Amalekites when David was away from it, in battle: “And it came to pass, when David and his men were come to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the south, and Ziklag, and smitten Ziklag, and burned it with fire” (1 Sam. 30:1). Upon his return to Ziklag, David realizes that “it was burned with fire; and their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, were taken captives” (1 Sam. 30:3). The identification of “hill 244” as the site of Ziklag is suggested by one of the soldiers, an avid reader of the Bible, partially on the basis of pottery shards that are scattered around. The existence of several tells (raised mounds covering remains of ancient towns) along the nearby wadi is indeed an archaeological indication that there were towns here in ancient times. However, the pottery shards on the hill could very well be broken household utensils from recently vacated homes, from hovels that are “still fresh and breathing” (24). By associating the Arab village with the biblical Ziklag, the novel superimposes the ancient destruction on the current one. Yizhar is in fact alluding to a possible manipulative transformation of these recent fragments of household utensils into the “household items” of the biblical (albeit Philistine) home of King David. This could be read as implicit criticism of the tendency in that period, strongly advocated by David Ben-Gurion, to rely on the Bible as a guide to establishing the state of Israel as the homeland of the Jews and to bolster the national narrative of ownership by means of extensive archeological excavations that were expected to prove past Jewish ownership of the land.¹¹

The identification of the hilltop as “our Ziklag,” soon to be declared erroneous by the same soldier who suggested it, seems to have left little impression on the soldiers even while it lasted. Having just expelled the Arab villagers by gunfire, they are gripped by the premonition—Yizhar’s premonition—that they are destined to be haunted by their victims’ ghosts: “It was only then that a repressed realization dawned on us and suddenly it unfolded: We are staying. Which also means that we are trapped” (29). Uncanny estrangement remains their prime experience, at least throughout the novel’s first half: the ground turns out to be hard and unyielding, and the attempts to dig defensive trenches prove impossible. The soldiers remain overwhelmed by the foreign smells surrounding them and are disturbed by foreign sounds. At one point the narrator feels that he is being watched silently and reproachfully by “someone,” and that the smell of the tabun is “weeping” (55). This powerful synesthesia is accompanied by the faraway brays of donkeys (61), cries of roosters (573, 588), chirping of crickets (568), and barking of dogs (568), all of which remind the narrator of the hoot of the desert owl. The name that Yizhar uses for this bird, however, has a somber connotation, invoking Psalm 102:7, where the afflicted speaker, desperately seeking God’s guidance, likens himself to the desert owl, “kos horavot,” which literally means “the owl of ruins.”

¹¹ It could also express Yizhar’s ironic stand toward attempts made in the 1950s (when he was writing this novel) to locate the site of biblical Ziklag. Different tells have been suggested by various archaeological delegations since then, but no agreement has been reached.

The choir of nocturnal voices attacks the soldiers “with a fierce hatred of rudeness and insolence and trespassing” (739), creating a petrifying, ghostly experience that is depicted as a lament: “the stupid chirping of these crickets, their indifferent mockery of your fears, and that whining dog lamenting like an owl of ruins, who pours down on your head the curse of the destruction of his home, and sends you the revenge of his old household gods [...]” (568). The soundtrack of *Yemei Ziklag*, a constant cry of the dispossessed, thus echoes the cry in “Sipur Khibet Khizeh,” which, in Shaul Setter’s words, is “a cry of loss and absence.”¹²

As the novel unfolds, however, the soldiers’ experience of the Arab home undergoes a slight change, and the sense of foreignness is undermined. The battle over the hill transforms the *hushas* into a military outpost—a “frontline post” and a “rear post.” The commanders’ statement that “hill 244” is “ours” gradually gains traction among the soldiers. Their meager food supply and their ammunition are now stored in the *hushas*, and they start feeling more at ease in them. Most importantly, their new sense of homeliness is a consequence of the soldiers’ fear of war, a fear that the novel is known for daringly and powerfully delineating—in itself a subversion of myth, in this case of manly heroism. Under the extreme conditions of constant Egyptian shelling, lack of weapons, and many casualties, the anxious soldiers yearn to stay inside the *hushas*, as they provide at least an illusion of shelter. They are also drawn to stare at the wounded and dead who are placed in a dark room, on the Arab owners’ mattresses. While the *hushas* still bear the imprint of their original inhabitants, the soldiers’ lived experience impregnates the domestic space. This superimposition effaces and partially erases the *hushas*’ previous unhomeliness.

The name “Ziklag” now has new connotations. It is adopted not only as a means of expressing the Jews’ historical affiliation to the biblical past, but also as a performative act that signifies ownership. In Yizhar’s earlier story, “The Prisoner,” the soldiers’ invasion of an Arab home in order to turn it into a military post is likened to a rape: “Suddenly their dress was pulled up over their faces, the disgrace of their nakedness revealed.”¹³ Although “The Prisoner” uses the same condescending language to describe the Arab home, the soldiers’ forced entry is sexualized and thus rendered despicable. By way of contrast, *Yemei Ziklag*, published a decade later, is more sympathetic to the soldiers’ penetration into the Arab village and their gradual sense of belonging that emerges in the novel’s final pages. At sunset, at the end of the battle that has finally shifted farther eastward, the soldiers suddenly see the hovels differently, from a new angle: “We have never seen it like this [...]. The wall of the hut is bathed in sunlight, orange colored, brown [...] and there is nothing more simple and innocent” (1154). The march from the new battle site back to the hill, now the army’s rear line, is likened at this closing point to a farmer’s weary walk home after his day’s work. Nevertheless, this closure is far from wholly assuaging the uncanniness, as it is fraught with a recognition that ownership of the conquered village will entail further, endless fighting: “And we return to the trenches. To the hovel. Like returning home [...] we return as we return from the field [...] tired. The same fatigue, only heavier [...]. Our hill. Are we done?” (1155). Here too there is an echo of the biblical Ziklag. Ziklag was a temporary home for David; he lost it in a war that was not his own, only to launch another war in revenge. This, Yizhar astonishingly foretells, is to be the destiny of the conquerors of Khibet Machaz for many years to come.

¹² Shaul Setter, “S. Yizhar, sipur shelo nigmar: Al kol ha-tse’akah shel kahal yehudi palestini be- ‘Sipur Khibet Khizeh’” [S. Yizhar, a never-ending story: On the cry of a Jewish/Palestinian collectivity in “The story of Khibet Khizeh”], *OT: A Journal of Literary Criticism and Theory* 6 (2016): 197.

¹³ Yizhar, “The Prisoner,” (84) (my translation since the existing translated version does not reflect the nuances of this description).

**“HOW CAN A FATHER HAVE SAT A BABY DOWN ON A WASPS’ NEST?”
— THE THREATENED HOME IN MIKDAMOT**

Around 1911, Yizhar’s father, Ze’ev Smilansky, joined Hulda, an experimental agricultural farm established three years earlier by Jewish workers near the Arab village of Khuldeh.¹⁴ He lived with his wife and firstborn son, Israel, in a room in the stone house at the farm’s center. In 1916 their youngest son, Yizhar, was born in nearby Rehovot. While working in agriculture by day, Smilansky dedicated his nights to writing political essays. *Mikdamot*’s first chapter gives a retrospective account of this period, in which Yizhar refers, in some detail, to his father’s polemic with Yitzhak Epstein’s famous 1907 essay, “She’elah ne’elamah” (A Hidden Question), which fiercely criticized the Zionists’ manipulative tactics that caused the dispossession of the poorest Arab peasants. Ze’ev Smilansky refuted Epstein’s allegations, but his son’s position is different, as implied by his recollection of an event that transpired when he was only two years old. While his father was plowing the land, the little boy sat at the foot of a carob tree, next to a large crack in the soil, which turned out to be a wasps’ nest.¹⁵ As he curiously inserted a twig into the hole, the provoked wasps ferociously stung him all over. Yizhar describes how his father reproached himself for not having been aware of the danger (“a father should never put a baby on a wasps’ nest and claim afterwards that he didn’t know” [74]). Unlike the indigenous Arab villagers who were intimately familiar with the terrain and its dangers, the father, a foreign newcomer, was an intellectual who had wide theoretical knowledge of wasps but lacked the practical wisdom that the ground under a carob tree is precisely where they tend to build their nests.

The relevance of the wasp episode to Jewish/Arab coexistence derives from the metaphorical meaning of a “wasps’ nest,” which in Hebrew, as in other languages, is commonly used to refer to a hostile place inhabited by evil schemers. Indeed *Mikdamot* describes the Arabs from the nearby villages in precisely such terms: “a hostile circle all around” (52).¹⁶ At the same time the story implies that the wasps’ aggressiveness was an act of self-defense, a reaction to the threat to their “home” represented by the child’s twig: “the necessary stinging of anyone who tries to push in where he has no right to push in, be this stranger as little as he may be [...]” (88). A threat to one’s home is thus presented as an experience common to both the new Jewish settlers and the native Arab inhabitants of the allegedly empty land. Elsewhere in the novel, Yizhar gives voice to the protest of both the Arabs and the terrain, thus echoing again the cries from “Sipur Khirbet Khizeh” and the howling lamentations from *Yemei Ziklag*: “Go, the earth cries here, get out of here shouts the place, go away, scream the streets, off with you, screech the alleys, away with the lot of you, and *Allahu Akbar*” (125).

Yizhar’s family left the farm in 1921 to settle in Tel Aviv but eventually moved from one neighborhood to the next before finally returning to Rehovot, which at the time was still a rural settlement. *Mikdamot* in fact presents this long series of relocations: from Hulda the family moves into a room in the Neveh Shalom neighborhood on Jaffa’s northern border. Later, they settle in an apartment on Montefiore Street in the Ahuzat Bayit neighborhood north of Jaffa, then in a

¹⁴ Nitsa Ben-Ari, *S. Yizhar: sipur hayyim* (S. Yizhar: A life story), part 1 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2013), 99. The Arab village Khuldeh had fifty-three residents, who were engaged in agriculture; they were evacuated when the area was occupied on April 6, 1948. That same year, Kibbutz Mishmar David was built on the site.

¹⁵ Yizhar, *Preliminaries*, 47. (Further references to this work will be placed within the text.)

¹⁶ The text mentions nine neighboring Arab villages, all of them demolished in 1948. Arab Khuldeh is, however, omitted.

small house Ze'ev Smilansky built for the family in the Tel Nordau neighborhood, with a mortgage he could not pay back. All these homes, as well as the one Smilansky finally built in Rehovot, were located at the edge, near the border: the fluid boundary between the Jewish and Arab settlements north of Jaffa; the northern edge of Tel Aviv in the early 1920s; and finally the border of Rehovot's orange groves, in a house that "rises above all the nothing all around [...]" (304).¹⁷ While *Mikdamot* is, in one respect, an autobiographical *Künstlerroman*, describing the author's initiation into the world of literature and art, it is also the story of these homes on a threshold, which reflect the mostly precarious domestic experience of unhomeliness.

Of special interest is the period when the family resided in Neveh Shalom, including during the three days of the notorious Arab riots in May 1921. While the family's precise address is not known, *Mikdamot* offers a detailed description of its immediate surroundings, indicating that it was located on the southeastern border of the neighborhood, near several sites clustered within a small radius: the wadi through which the trains to Jaffa passed; the Shlush bridge, spanning this wadi; the Wagner Brothers' iron-casting factory in the nearby Valhalla neighborhood (so named by its Templer residents); Barnett Street; the Teachers' Seminary (today the site of the Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre) in which Ze'ev Smilansky worked as an administrator and where Yizhar's kindergarten was located. Though apparently built by Jews, the architectural style of the Neveh Shalom house was influenced by Arab architecture.¹⁸ Its three facades enclosed a courtyard. A portico was attached to the building, whose rooms were rented to families who led a kind of collective life in the courtyard they shared and used the well located at its center.¹⁹

This home, and the neighborhood housing it, reflect the intertwined existence of Jews and Arabs in Palestine/Eretz Israel. Neveh Shalom was an integral part of the modern urban space north of Jaffa called Manshiya, though Neveh Shalom and Manshiya were, and still are, perceived as ethnically separate entities, Arab and Jewish. In an essay on the area's history, Or Aleksandrowicz problematizes the historical narrative about the nascence of Tel Aviv as a Hebrew city by showing that the double name, "Manshiya/Neveh Shalom," had been used *before* the first buildings of the so-called Jewish Neveh Shalom were erected. Jews and Arabs lived together there, sometimes even in each other's homes.²⁰ Even after both Neveh Shalom and adjacent Neveh Tzedek were recognized as lying outside the Jaffa municipality, the border remained fuzzy, consisting of what Aleksandrowicz terms "paper boundaries." Jews and Arabs lived in proximity, on the same streets, without any perceptible division.²¹

The decision on the formal separation between these so-called "Arab" and "Jewish" entities was made in the months April–June 1921. This subsequently became a genuine fault line in Jewish-Arab relations in the mixed neighborhood, which was the heart of Jewish life in Jaffa at

¹⁷ Dvir Tzur, in his essay "Strolling in Tel Aviv: Setting Up and Breaking Down Boundaries in S. Yizhar's *Preliminaries (Mikdamot)*," *AJS Review* 41, no. 1 (2017): 67–88, presents various kinds of borders, including geographical, as the core of the novel. Accordingly, Tzur refers to the entire text as "liminal."

¹⁸ Ron Fuchs, "Ha-bayit ha-aravi ha-eretz yisre'eli: Iyun mehudash, helek 2: Ha-temurot be-tarbut ha-megurim ba-me'ah ha-tsha'esreh" [The Palestinian Arab house reconsidered—Part 2: Domestic architecture in the nineteenth century], *Cathedra* 90 (1998): 53–58 (includes architectural sketches).

¹⁹ Wells and water cisterns were dug at that time to supply water to the residents of a single house and sometimes served several buildings in one neighborhood.

²⁰ Or Aleksandrowicz, "Gvulot shel niyar: Ha-historiyah ha-mehukah shel shekhunat Neveh Shalom" [Paper boundaries: The erased history of the Neveh Shalom neighborhood], *Te'orayah U-Vikoret* (Theory and Criticism), no. 41 (2013): 165–197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 170–71.

that time. It may have led, at least in part, to the May 1921 riots. Yizhar's autobiographical novel is pertinent to this very issue. Similar to the pointed questions placed in parentheses throughout *Yemei Ziklag*, he cannot refrain from asking: "Wasn't this our place? Wasn't it their place? Were we intruders? Were they intruders?" (116).

The events described in this chapter transpire on May 2, 1921, the second day of the bloody riots in Jaffa. Forty-six Jews were murdered, and hundreds were injured. Among the dead was the revered writer Y. H. Brenner, whose murder came to symbolize the calamity that befell Jaffa's Jews. Two workers' demonstrations were held that day in Manshiya. One, by young communists, mostly Arabs, quickly escalated into an attack on Jewish residents and businesses, which reached its peak right next to the Smilansky family's home, at the Teachers' Seminary.²²

Although the narrative is in the third person, Yizhar adheres to his childhood perspective of these highly unsettling events. The child's experience is imbued with the material features of his home, the details of which transmit his dwindling sense of security: the stones of the walls are crumbling; the plaster is flaking off, its ochre color faded; the shutters are dilapidated and dusty; the ceiling creaks; and there is a palpable fear that "everything is collapsing and about to fall" (114–15). Of particular interest to the child are the unhewn *kurkar* stones (a kind of coastal sandstone) and the sealing material between them: a mixture of small stones, sand, and lime called *debesh*, commonly used in Arab construction. In an essay on the politics of the building materials of Tel Aviv, Aleksandrowicz argues that the builders of Ahuzat Bayit, established north of the intertwined neighborhoods, rejected "Arab" *kurkar* stones in favor of an innovative product for that time, concrete bricks, in the use of which Jewish workers quickly became proficient.²³ The young protagonist thus unknowingly casts his frightened yet fascinated gaze on an Arab "housing culture" and building technique that are about to vanish from Jewish neighborhoods.

The child's unhomely experience is underscored twice through the metaphor of an open mouth: the pitcher, also called here by its Arabic name, *jarra* (99), and the well with its "dark, frightening depth" (93). Three years after the wasps sprang out of the hole under the carob tree, the boy, now five years old, once again faces a daunting cavity, which is both tempting and repulsive. The narrator-child imagines the darkness of the well when its lid is closed, shielding its slippery, slime-covered inner walls. On the day of the riots, he considers hiding in the well, but the very idea makes him shudder. The well thus epitomizes the duality of the homely that is at one and the same time unhomely: it provides shelter but elicits disgust and terror.

The fear of violence—a genuine, appropriate fear—permeates the narrative through memories of a profound and persistent anxiety that exists in quieter times as well. One such memory concerns a neighboring building, a three-story factory, now derelict and ruined, which the child obsessively imagines as baring "tearing claws" and spreading "a terrible, malignant sickness": "He would never be able to escape from [...] the sight of those smashed things, the desolation that moaned from their fragments [...] like some kind of curse [...]" (120). Another recollection is of an episode during Purim: monstrous figures run into the house, causing the child to have an anxiety attack. Though these monsters are none other than his older brother and his friends in costumes, they are uncannily threatening to him as he is convinced that the children's usual

²² See, among others, the description by Shmuel Giler, whose uncle was among those killed in Manshiya, as it appears on the Project Ben-Yehuda website, <https://benyehuda.org/read/21484>.

²³ "The building materials were a weapon in a national struggle over the symbolic value of the built environment." See Or Aleksandrowicz, "Kurkar, melet, aravim, yehudim: Eikh bonim ir ivrit" [Kurkar, cement, Arabs, Jews: How to construct a Hebrew city], *Te'oryah U-Vikoret* [Theory and Criticism] 36 (2010): 76.

appearance could just as easily be a cloak for the monsters swarming below, who have suddenly emerged at home and might do so again.

Horror characterizes the child's narrative also in the following chapters, and the unhomey is repeatedly acted out and relived. Thus, the lengthy description of events in the family's rented apartment on Montefiore Street, where they lived in 1922, is subtitled "Regel ba-pah" (A Leg in the Dustbin) (149). It relates a gruesome story that echoes reports recounted in the previous chapter about a tailor who was savagely decapitated in the Jaffa riots. The motif of cutting off body parts recurs here, as a rumor spreads among the children that a doctor amputated the leg of a sick woman who lived nearby and threw it into the public garbage bin. This causes yet another attack of intense existential anxiety in the child: "A leg on its own. [...] What's it like, a leg without a body. [...] It's intolerable. It's unbearable" (168). Just minutes before receiving the shocking news, on his way home from school, he was looking with joy at the new houses of Ahuzat Bayit on Rothschild Boulevard and Nahalat Binyamin and Ahad Ha'am Streets. The information that greets him at home about the amputated leg transforms the entire space once again into a site of perils and terror. Masks also make a second appearance, again in relation to the Purim holiday. In the commotion of a Purim parade the boy loses his father and searches his way home in the dark in tears, only to find the door locked. Again, he experiences an acute sense of losing his place in the world (171). In another episode, the uncanniness associated with the derelict factory in Neveh Shalom is reinforced by news of yet another "sick" house, this time on Montefiore Street: not only does the house resemble a castle and thus does not seem to belong to its surroundings, but it is quarantined due to a life-threatening "plague or pestilence, maybe cholera, [that] broke out there" (175).



A strong connection can therefore be discerned between the experience of the home in Yizhar's early and later literary works. Formative childhood memories of unhomeliness reverberate in his depiction of the defiled Arab homes in *Yemei Ziklag*. Indeed, the 1948 encounter with the Arab novel seems to have triggered early traumatic memories. Yizhar first investigated the home/homelessness dilemma in a political context in 1958, in his immense magnum opus. Only decades later did he explore his own traumatic past, in what may be understood as an attempt to theorize the perpetual, unexpected nature of violence. Read in conjunction with *Yemei Ziklag*, *Mikdamot* may thus explain Yizhar's unique sensitivity, rivaled by no other Israeli writer of his time, to the problematics of the Israeli home, both symbolic and real. Specifically, *Mikdamot* may disclose Yizhar's own retrospective reflections on *Yemei Ziklag*, expressing his acknowledgment of an inevitable shift in positions, where unhomeliness is the destiny of one side of the struggle, then the other, and where both sides' traumas are inseparably intertwined. *Yemei Ziklag's* intertext, the story of David, with its own figure of the instability of the home, is the primal scene of this chain of Yizharian homelessness at the core of which lies the recognition that no home is safe, and that today's home may well be tomorrow's ruin (and vice versa).

As the journey from one dwelling to another approaches its end, an elegiac tone permeates the narrative, which seems to stem, at least in part, from the narrator's father's deteriorating health, his sense of failure, and his financial difficulties. In this context, the amputated organs and unstable houses serve as metaphors for the father's emasculation. Even when the father succeeds in building two homes for his family, in Tel Nordau and in Rehovot, their building materials are

purposely sparse; to save money, he adds only a little concrete to the bricks. Thus, the father's weakness is inextricably intertwined with the fragile homes which fail to provide the child with a sense of stability. The fusing of father and home reaches its apex in the novel's final paragraphs, in which the author mourns both his father and the house from which Ze'ev Smilansky was "carried out [...] to the old burial ground [...]" (304). In 1989, two years before *Mikdamot* was written, the house had been sold and consequently demolished.²⁴

The melancholic undertone that suffuses both *Yemei Ziklag* and *Mikdamot* is related to yet another aspect of uncanniness in Yizhar's literature, worthy of further, separate discussion: namely, the author's unique sensitivity to the fragility of ecosystems in the face of humanly caused destruction. His texts deeply lament the annihilation of the country's open spaces, both nascent urban and rural: the sand dunes, the sea, the orange groves. The retrospective narrator, particularly in *Mikdamot*, knows only too well that this process is destined to accelerate in coming years and obliterate large portions of the natural landscape. He places this foresight in the mind of the young child, for whom each newly built house, exciting as it may be, corrodes yet another sand dune, thus eradicating primordial scenery: "and so now another hill has been wiped off the sum of all the wild hills that were here once. [...] and something [...] seems to be missing [...] and it's sad" (223). The tragic outcome pertains not only to Israelis and Palestinians, but also to nature itself, which can no longer offer a primordial haven: "When you begin to upset that sempiternal equilibrium that has been preserved intact for thousands of years," Yizhar says of his beloved city of Tel Aviv, "you never know where you will end up" (87). A

²⁴ For S. Yizhar's mourning of his father in *Mikdamot*, see Iris Milner, "Tmunot zikaron, sipur hayyim" [Memory pictures, a life story], in *Tarbut, zikaron ve-historiyah: Be-hokarah le-Anita Shapira* [Culture, memory, and history: Essays in honor of Anita Shapira], ed. Meir Chazan and Uri Cohen, part 2, *Tarbut ve-zikaron yisre'eli* [Israeli culture and memory] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2012): 421–47. Nitsa Ben-Ari notes that Yizhar wrote *Mikdamot* in response to the destruction of the house in Rehovot in 1989, and that this painful event in fact triggered his resumption of literary writing in the 1990s. See her essay, "Hero or Antihero? S. Yizhar's Ambivalent Zionism and the First Sabra Generation," in *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel*, ed. Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 81–96, esp. 94.