

SHIRA

S. Y. AGNON

A NEWLY REVISED TRANSLATION
FROM THE HEBREW BY

Zeva Shapiro

WITH AN ILLUSTRATED
AFTERWORD BY

Robert Alter

AND A NEWLY TRANSLATED CHAPTER
FROM THE AUTHOR'S ARCHIVE

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Book One

Chapter one

It was almost twilight when Manfred Herbst brought his wife to the hospital. After a few minutes, footsteps were heard, and Axelrod, the clerk, arrived, talking over his shoulder to an aide, to the aide's wife, to both of them at once. As he walked and talked, he shifted his glasses from his eyes to his forehead and looked around in alarm, as if he had come into his house and found a stranger there. He asked what he asked, said what he said, took out a notebook, put his glasses back in place, and wrote what he wrote. Finally, he brought Mrs. Herbst to the room where women in labor wait to be assigned their beds. Manfred dragged along behind his wife, then came and sat with her.

Manfred sat at Henrietta's side with the other women about to give birth, thinking about her and her pregnancy, which had come upon them not by design for, being past midlife, she was, presumably, beyond such concerns. How would she withstand the anguish of birth and how would she endure what follows? But what is done is done. Now, we have no choice but to accept whatever windfall comes our way as a gift from heaven. He reached over to stroke her tired arms, her withered cheek. When she dozed off, a sad smile playing

on her swollen lips, he dozed off too, becoming his wife's partner in anguish and in joy.

The hospital nurse arrived – tall, mannish, with glasses that towered over her eyes arrogantly and lit the freckles in her ashen cheeks so that they shone like nailheads in an old wall. Manfred had seen her for the first time some three or four years earlier. On that day, Jerusalem was in deep mourning. A young man from a leading family had been killed by a Gentile, and the entire city was gathered for the procession to the graveyard. Just then, with everyone grieving, that very woman sauntered out of the hospital in her uniform, head held high, a lit cigarette protruding from her mouth, her entire person arrogant and defiant. From that day on, whenever they crossed paths, Manfred Herbst would turn away rather than see her. Now that she had appeared, he was angry at the hospital administration for putting her in charge. A vulgar-spirited person, who behaved arrogantly and defiantly while a city mourned, could hardly be expected to have compassion for those who need compassion. She had come to extend her harsh hand over these tender women, and Henrietta too was in her power for life and death. His thoughts returned to his wife, who was about to give birth, and once again he began to reflect on the things that confront a woman in labor and thereafter. Imperceptibly, his eyelids began to contract with sympathy.

How did I happen to think of Lisbet Neu, Herbst asked himself. I wasn't really thinking of her, but I'll think of her now. And, remembering her, a breath of innocence swept over him, as it did whenever she came to mind. The radiant darkness of her eyes, without a hint of anger, the cast of her delicate face, her grace, her beauty, her fetching stance, her fine limbs – all were evidence that the Creator had not lost the power to fashion splendid creatures. Add to this her family connections, her manner, her burdened life, her Ashkenazic piety, all of which were barriers, so that, even as his thoughts were becoming schemes, they were pushed beyond her domain. That nurse, the one he called Nadia, was back again. Her name was actually Shira. Her father, a Hebrew teacher and an early Zionist, had called her Shira after his mother, Sarah.

Shira did not show the women to their rooms. She came and

sat with them, as if she were sick or about to give birth herself. As Herbst closed his eyes to avoid looking at her, a beggar appeared, blind in both eyes, and began to mill about among the women. Herbst was surprised at the hospital staff for allowing this fat beggar to roam through the building, among weary women about to deliver, dragging his feet, touching each one of them while humming a monotonous tune with neither beginning nor end, his red headdress ablaze with derisive laughter. Nadia, *i.e.*, Shira, *i.e.*, Nadia, opened a pack of cigarettes and said to him in Russian, "My dove, would you like a cigarette?" He spoke no Russian and answered in Turkish, a language Shira, *i.e.*, Nadia, didn't know, touching her shoulder as he spoke. Herbst thought of telling her: The blind man is a Turk and doesn't know your language. But he kept his mouth shut, saying nothing, as he did not wish to speak with her.

Shira sat confined to her body, which began to expand and grow so that her ample limbs enveloped the fat beggar. Herbst shifted his eyes and mused: The nerve of that woman. She is shameless and of such poor taste as to reach out and embrace a blind beggar with a foul stench coming from his eyes. The women were now astir, watching Shira and the beggar. They watched, less baffled than curious. Then suddenly something baffling occurred. The two of them were so close together that they began to dwindle and dissolve, until nothing was left of Shira except her left sandal, which was baffling, for a sandal is only one of the body's trappings, and how could two persons – one fat, the other somewhat fat – be enclosed in it? And what if they were not enclosed in the sandal? Where were they then? Our eyes have been fixed on them constantly, but we didn't see them go. We insist they are in the sandal. Nevertheless, it makes sense to ask Henrietta what is fact and what is fancy. Before he had a chance to ask, he felt her long, warm fingers stroking his forehead and heard her saying, "My love, they're coming to take me to my bed. I'm going now."

Manfred opened his eyes and saw his wife standing up, a small hospital nurse holding both her hand and her small suitcase. He took leave of his wife, who clung to him, as she always did when she was about to give birth, as she had done when she was about to give birth to Zahara and when she was about to give birth to Tamara.

Manfred gave her a parting kiss, the same sort of kiss he had given her half a generation ago, when she was about to give birth to his eldest daughter, Zahara, and when she was about to give birth to her sister, Tamara. After kissing her, he kissed her again and went on his way.

He thought to himself as he walked: I know the entire episode was a dream. In which case, why agonize over it, why not dismiss it from my mind, why not accept it as a dream? I will now abandon all those fruitless struggles and see just what I need to do. He searched his mind and found nothing that needed to be done, surely nothing that needed to be done immediately and couldn't just as well be put off until after Henrietta gave birth, even until she was back home. He turned toward home and began to consider the dinner he would prepare as well as the book he would read.

Engrossed in thought, he walked on, looking in his notebook to see if there was anything he had to do on the way home. There was nothing he had to do, but there were addresses, among them the phone number of Lisbet Neu, a relative of his celebrated mentor, Professor Neu. He remembered telling her that he would almost certainly call one day soon. In truth, this was neither the day nor the hour to telephone a young woman. Moreover, he had nothing to say to her. But, Herbst thought, since I promised to call, I will keep my promise. As he was near a phone booth, he went in to call her.

Chapter two

How did Herbst know Lisbet Neu? It happened that one Saturday, before noon, in a lull between rains, Herbst went to congratulate Dr. Ernst Weltfremdt, who had been promoted that same week from associate to full professor. While Herbst was at Weltfremdt's, two women, one old and one young, came to congratulate the new professor. Weltfremdt introduced Dr. Herbst to them. The older woman, tilting her head slightly, offered the tips of her right fingers. The younger one offered her hand and said to him, "I was once in your house." Herbst replied, "Odd that I didn't see you." She smiled and said, "I didn't see you either. You were out." Herbst said, "Much to my regret. When was this?" She said, "When my uncle, Professor Neu, was in Jerusalem, he went to call on you, and I went with him." Herbst said, "What a misfortune, my dear lady; to think that Professor Neu came to my house, and I wasn't there to welcome him. But I hope to see him soon, and perhaps I will have the good fortune to see you with him." The older woman said, "Our uncle is old, and the discomforts of travel are a strain on him. I doubt if he will come again." Herbst said, "In any case..." and didn't elaborate. But he thought to himself: Though he won't come because of his age

and the strain of travel, you, my dear lady, are young, and the roads leap out toward you. Perhaps you will come again.

He left Weltfremdt's house and had not gone far when he began to picture Lisbet Neu's face, realizing how rare it was to see such a woman. He was sorry he hadn't said something to her that could be pursued. But, even if he had said something that could be pursued, he could not have pursued it, for he was married, the father of two grown daughters; even if he were to speak with her again, what did it matter? Still, Lisbet Neu was certainly worth seeing.

Like people who choose a vocation in their youth, Manfred Herbst put Lisbet Neu out of mind. When he did remember her, he remembered only so he could tell himself that even if he were to find her, he wouldn't recognize her, because he didn't have an eye for faces and wouldn't recognize anyone after a single meeting, even a woman as lovely as Lisbet Neu. Perhaps he should have asked her to be sure to say hello, should she happen to see him first, because of his age, because of his vision, or because of both of these infirmities. Having neglected to ask, there was no hope of seeing her.

What hope did not accomplish was accomplished through luck. Not many days later, he met her, recognized her, and, what is more, it was he who recognized her instantly, whereas she didn't know him until he told her his name, for, when she had come with her mother to congratulate Professor Weltfremdt on becoming a full professor, she hadn't had a chance to engrave Herbst's image in her heart. For one thing, all of Professor Weltfremdt's furnishings were black, a setting in which it is hard to discern a person's face, and, for another, immediately after conveying their good wishes, they left to give the two scholars a chance to talk about their own affairs.

She was plainly dressed and wore a straw hat, which was out of season, for summer was over and the days were rainy. It was clear from her appearance that she was poor. Those immigrants from Germany, who had lived in an abundance of wealth and honor until they were exiled from their splendid houses by Gentiles and who finally went up to the Land of Israel, were penniless and financially pressed by the time they found jobs. But her poverty was masked by charm, charm that was enhanced by reticence. At first glance, she seemed

to have no self-confidence, like someone who has landed in a place where she is totally unknown. But, in this case, her reticence was in her character. She felt that she didn't deserve to enjoy the bounty of a land others had toiled over – for her father's and mother's families had lived complacently, fulfilling their commitment to the Land of Israel through donations to the poor of Jerusalem and to charitable organizations, while the Jews of Russia, Poland, Galicia, and Rumania came and built houses, planted vineyards, made citrus groves, established settlements, and prepared the country for their brothers-in-exile. Much as Herbst scorned both racist theory and the would-be scholars of this would-be theory, when he discovered Lisbet Neu, in whom youthful grace was joined with ancient splendor, he was glad, despite himself, to be of her people.

Since Lisbet Neu is destined to occupy several sections of the book *Shira*, I will include some of the conversation between Dr. Herbst and Lisbet Neu. But, rather than present it in dialogue form, I will relate the general content of their conversation.

Herbst began by telling Lisbet Neu about the recent book by her aged uncle, Professor Alfred Neu, which even his adversaries conceded was a scholarly breakthrough that would soon be considered a classic in the field. Lisbet was very surprised. In all the years she had known her uncle, it had never occurred to her that his distinction derived from books. She regarded him as an uncle, one of her closest relations. He was actually a distant relative, but, since we have no special word for this relationship, and since it is customary to use the term *uncle* broadly, she called him Uncle, though he was not her uncle but her grandfather's uncle, having been born to an elderly father at an advanced age, so that, as it turned out, he was younger than her own grandfather, who was the grandson of Professor Neu's grandfather. "But," Lisbet Neu said, "my mother and I are now worried, for it is more than a year and a half since our uncle wrote to us, and he used to write three or four times a year, apart from sending New Year greetings." "He wrote to you four or five times a year?" Herbst cried in amazement. "Four or five times a year.... He must be very fond of you. Scholars from all over the world send him letters that remain

unanswered. If he does answer, he answers one out of many, so he takes time from them for you and writes to you four or five times a year!" Herbst did not take leave of Lisbet Neu without promising to inquire about Professor Neu's health and report back to her.

As it happened, Herbst happened to stop in to see his friend Professor Lemner and found him in a state of elation, having just received a letter from Professor Neu. And, as it happened, he happened to run into Lisbet Neu that very day. He said to her, "I have something good to tell you, my dear lady. I just saw a letter from Professor Neu that was received today, written in a hand that proves he has the strength of seven youths." Lisbet Neu laughed and said, "We had a letter too. He must have written both letters on the same day. Uncle Alfred sets aside special days for letter writing." From then on, whenever Manfred Herbst met Lisbet Neu, he would discuss Professor Neu with her. So-and-so had a letter from Professor Neu; in such-and-such a journal, there was an article about her uncle or about his theory. Since she knew so little about Professor Neu's field, Herbst could not engage her with words. Since he could not engage her with words, the conversation ended where it began. He was aware that he was not one to win a maiden's heart through fine conversation, so he was brief rather than risk inflicting boredom. To her, this was a virtue, for she understood, in her own way, that Dr. Herbst was a distinguished scholar, and it was not the way of scholars to converse with simple girls endowed with neither Torah, wisdom, nor anything else.

A month passed, then another month. The world was occupied with its affairs, as was Dr. Herbst. Who can relate the affairs of the world? The affairs of Dr. Herbst I can relate.

I'll begin with essentials and relate one thing at a time. He prepared lectures and delivered them to his students. He read many books and journals in his field, as well as related fields. When he found something worthwhile, he copied it by hand and put it in a box. If it was not worth copying, but nonetheless of interest, he would mark it in pencil, sometimes even in ink. In addition to all this, he talked with his colleagues at the university, with his students, and at times

with ordinary people, such as the bus driver, the shopkeeper who sold him stationery, or the neighbors, and, needless to say, with his wife and daughters when they were at home. Zahara, his eldest daughter, lived on a *kvutza*, and Tamara lived at home and didn't burden her father with conversation. I will not dwell on the daughters now, though I mean to tell about them in time.

And so several months passed, during which he didn't see Lisbet Neu. He was too busy to notice. When he did notice, he thought to himself: How is it that one doesn't see Neu's relative? Finding no one to answer his question, he answered it himself: She must have gone to Tel Aviv or to some other place. Finding no one to ask, he observed to himself: Actually, what's it to me if she's in Jerusalem or not? Even if she is in Jerusalem, and if I do see her, I have nothing to say to her. Still, what a joy it is for a "tent dweller" to venture into town and see a fine young woman there.