

# 'What's never said'

• SUSAN SHAPIRO

In Susan Shapiro's new novel *What's Never Said*, Daniel Wildman, a 42-year-old American Jewish professor in Israel in 1982, wants to get serious with Ronit, a sexy dark-haired Sabra. But first he has to meet Ronit's protective older brother Ari Halev, an internationally famous poet, in Yemin Moshe.

When the bus stopped, Ronit said "this is us." Daniel's stomach lurched. After weeks of eating onions, peppers, and spicy hummus and tabouli for breakfast at her restaurant every day, getting heartburn in the hopes of meeting Ari, Daniel was suddenly terrified. He had an urge to turn back, to be alone with Ronit. He didn't want to share her. He finally felt strong and successful; he feared fading in a greater man's shadow.

They climbed off the bus and he followed her down cobblestone streets. Although it was a nice, breezy day, he was perspiring, wishing he'd worn shorts and sneakers, not long pants and loafers with no traction. Daniel pointed to the huge windmill overlooking the Hinnom Valley on King David Street.

"We bolster our love, like building/ a white windmill in a city with no wind," Daniel quoted from Ari's poem, amused it was a literal landmark he'd seen from his window, not a metaphor.

"It hasn't worked in decades," she said. "Want to see the museum? It's dedicated to the English Jew who built it in 1860."

The only Israeli monument on his mind was Ari Halev. Daniel felt like a disciple about to meet King David himself. As he climbed the steep hill of rickety steps carrying his briefcase and a bottle of Chivas, Daniel was dripping in sweat, like a pig. He prayed she didn't notice.

"Ah, here we are," Ronit said as they reached the black iron gate of this ancient castle.

The courtyard's floors were white stone, the high walls lush with green vines, punctuated with purple flowers. Ari stood waiting for them. He was bigger than Daniel expected, a huge bear of a guy, tall, tan, robust, bald, bespectacled. Majestic and ancient, like a Hebrew Buddha. He wore beige shorts, a T-shirt and rugged hiking sandals – how Daniel should have dressed.

"Ronity sheli," Ari said, kissing her on both cheeks.

He was calling her mine. Possessive already, Daniel thought.

Ari looked at him and said, "Just what the world needs, another Jewish poet."

"Yes, how original of me." Daniel

fumbled with his briefcase and bottle to find his hand.

Ari shook it with an iron grip.

"Yemin Moshe is so picturesque," Daniel fawned, feeling desperate to win over this giant genius. Was it envy or awe that had him so tongue-tied?

"In this country your land and your children are your only legacy," Ari one-upped him.

"In Manhattan it's all location," Daniel said.

What did that inane real estate slogan mean? The brilliant commentary Daniel had rehearsed flew out of his mind. He handed Ari the Chivas Regal Royal Salute, thinking the name had the proper gravitas for this meeting. His host barely noticed, putting it down on the counter.

"So how long has your family lived here?" Daniel ventured.

"Through five wars," Ari answered.

How could he compete with Ari's eloquence? As they ambled through the foyer, Ronit in between them, Daniel reached for Ronit just as Ari put his arm around his sister's waist, claiming her.

"Ronit said you fought in the last three?" Daniel asked.

"Yes. Not the business of a poet," he said. "You've never been to war?"

"I just missed the draft in Vietnam."

"Would you have fought?" Ari asked.

"No, I would have fled to Canada," Daniel admitted, immediately regretting his words, seeing himself through Ari's eyes: a cowardly American. Daniel told himself that poets were word warriors who didn't belong on the battlefield, and Vietnam was a war he didn't believe in. But now all the brave poets who had fought in wars they'd chronicled were flooding his mind, mocking him.

"Only the religious refuse to fight in my country," Ari commented.

"I'm not religious," Daniel said, making it worse.

"I wouldn't have gone to Vietnam either," Ari said.

Daniel relaxed a bit. "You know, I teach my New York classes your poetry," he said.

"In Hebrew?" Ari tested.

"Unfortunately the English translation."

"Which translator?"

"I prefer Sarah Berger's from the Norton Selected," Daniel tried.

"Yes, Berger hears me."

"Chaim Segal has a tin ear," Daniel added.

"Yes, exactly." Ari nodded.

Daniel scored one!

"Not enough music," Ronit piped in, winking at him.

"Segal doesn't do your work justice. Because he's not really a poet himself." Daniel shared his theory. "Though the translators who are poets turn your work into theirs."



A MODERN love story in the ancient neighborhood of Yemin Moshe. (Illustrative/Jerusalem Post Archives/Werner Braun)



Ari nodded. "When Aton Pegis translates the Bible, the Bible becomes a Pegis treatise."

Daniel laughed. Too loudly.

"Here, let me show you around," Ronit offered, momentarily ending the inquisition, taking his hand and leading him down the steps to the sunken living room with high ceilings, a fireplace and gray stone walls.

"Gorgeous home." Could Daniel find anything more superficial to say?

"They've asked him to stay on at Hebrew University," Ronit said, then kissed Daniel on the lips. The gesture made Ari wince.

"You came to my country by yourself?" Ari wanted to know.

"Yes, all alone," Daniel confirmed.

"Never married?" Ari asked a question he obviously knew the answer to. "Why not?"

Israelis were the least subtle people on the planet. Ari was asking 'What's wrong with you? Tell me now so you don't waste my sister's time.' Just what Daniel didn't need was to feel bullied by the Hebrew version of his condescending American boss.

"You're a great advocate of marriage," Daniel shot back. "With three divorces."

"Yes, what a ridiculous hypocrite I am. But I liked it so much I had three nice wedding buffets. You should try it sometime," Ari smiled slyly.

"Maybe I will," Daniel mustered up the courage to say, adding, "Let's have a drink."

"Should we open your fancy whiskey?" Ari threw out.

Aha, he had noticed the gift. There was not much he missed.

"We could all use a drink," Ronit agreed, taking the bottle, running her hand against Daniel's arm as she went to the kitchen. He immediately missed Ronit's presence in the room. He felt stronger beside her, calmer.

"So has time made the man any less fearful?" Ari attacked Daniel with his own line.

Daniel was overjoyed to hear a snatch of his poem coming from Ari's mouth, yet also embarrassed that he'd revealed his fear of marriage.

"They say a true intellectual has found something more interesting than sex," Ari said.

"All your wives were younger, no?" Daniel asked.

"That's why I have six children."

"The six anchors of time," Daniel said, citing a poem of Ari's.

"My Ronit has no time for fear. She's 32," Ari said. "She was engaged at 17, to Shmulik. *Hazar betshuva.*"

Daniel didn't understand.

"He became religious," Ari translated.

"Wanted a traditional wife to stay home and give him children right away. Ronit wasn't ready."

"Yes, she told me," Daniel said.

"Changed his name to Shmuel, voting for wars he became too pious to fight."

Daniel tried to decipher whether Ari had contempt for any man who didn't fight, just poor Shmuel, or all of Ronit's boyfriends.

"That's why we have the mess in Lebanon now. A mess my son must fight but not Shmuel. He married a frum girl who already gave him four sons who won't go to war either."

Daniel was trying to follow. "Talk about hypocrisy," he said, actually pleased Shmuel was now occupying Ari's wrath instead of himself.

"When Ronit was in the army, she brought home a pro-Palestinian boyfriend. He gets himself released from military service for declaring his pacifism," Ari went on. "That didn't get enough of a rise out of me. So while she's studying at Tel Aviv University, she plays peacenik and starts dating Baqi, a Gaza professor. Romeo and Juliet's cliché, I told her."

Daniel was more interested in Baqi's age and career than ethnicity. So Ronit had dated an old professor before. Daniel wasn't her first.

"Baqi lasted six months," Ari added.

"Until she found out he was married with two kids in Jordan."

Daniel wondered whether Ari was sharing a list of Ronit's old boyfriends to scare him away. It wasn't working. They were all losers who made Daniel look good. All he'd have to do to win the contest was not be married, a public pacifist or a religious hypocrite.

"So Ronit says you're 42 with no children?" Ari asked.

"Not even illegitimate ones," Daniel joked.

Ari pulled a cigarette from a box of Noblesse, offered one to Daniel. He didn't like cigarettes, but Daniel chuckled nervously and took one, wanting to hide behind the smoke.

"Don't you want children?" Ari lit the cigarette for Daniel. Another test.

Ari's penetrating stare made Daniel feel like he'd better decide. This minute.

"Yes," Daniel surprised himself by confessing. "I want kids."

"Well, we don't grow any younger," Ari commented.

"Here we go," Ronit sang, coming back with a tray holding the bottle and three glasses of whiskey. They each took one and held it up.

"Salut," Daniel said.

"To your future sons and daughters." Ari hit his glass against Daniel's. "*L'Chaim!*"

Ronit must have noted Daniel's pale expression because she asked, "What did I miss? Did he propose you marry and impregnate me by next week to avenge the loss of six million?"

As Daniel emptied his glass, Ronit poured more.

"Religious Arabs and Hasidic women are smart enough to have nine and 10 children each," Ari said. "But overeducated secular Sabras are too busy getting Ph.D.s to replenish the planet. A Jewish man without children is like a river with no water."

"A Jewish woman without children is like a dirty floor with no mop," Ronit mocked.

"You think it's funny to be childless?" Ari asked.

"A Jewish woman with no children is like a kangaroo with no pouch," Daniel tried.

"A Jewish woman without children is a jigsaw puzzle with no edge," Ronit went on.

"Go ahead, make fun," Ari said, pouring more booze. "But I have recreated my ugly DNA on the planet six times while Ronit has left nothing. Wasting your gorgeous, smart, strong genes is a biological tragedy my dear."

She waved her hand to dismiss Ari's plea. "Daniel's joining us for Yom Kippur services on Monday," she said.

Interesting, Daniel thought, how she didn't ask either of them. She'd already decided though her brother clearly hadn't.

"Do you fast?" Ari wanted to know. Another exam question.

"Yes. Of course I do," Daniel lied.

"Not me. I like to eat shellfish," Ari said. Daniel wasn't sure if this was a joke or a trap. Could the most acclaimed Bard of the Holy Land actually go for lobster on Yom Kippur?

"You'll come with us to temple and break fast here," Ari stated.

Daniel was pleased to be winning him over. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be." He bowed his head before Ari, feeling honored, welcomed, as if he had to travel thousands of miles to find home.

"Want to get us food?" Ari asked his sister. "I'm hungry. Always hungry, like my father," he told Daniel. "It's a male Halev trait."

"What am I, your servant?" Ronit asked, nonetheless going back to the kitchen to fetch food for her men.

"To your beautiful sister," Daniel toasted, holding up his glass.

"If you hurt her," Ari said, "I'll drink your blood like Christ's." ■

Susan Shapiro is *The New York Times* best-selling author of 10 books. You can follow her on Twitter at @Susanshapironet.



**'DANIEL WAS** pleased to be winning Ari over.'  
(Illustrative/Jerusalem Post Archives/Karen Benzian)