



**Center for Israel Education**

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**Naomi Shemer**

**The Leadership Series**

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Shemer Performing At Caesarea Amphitheatre  
Cover Photo Credit: Alpert Nathan, National Photo Collection

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## 1. Naomi's Early Life

*"Jerusalem of gold  
And of copper, and of light  
Behold I am a violin for all your songs."  
-Naomi Shemer (Jerusalem of Gold)*

Naomi Shemer was born on July 13, 1930, on Kibbutz Kinneret, overlooking the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Her parents, Meir Sappir and Rivka Shostaliski, had settled and helped found Kibbutz Kinneret after immigrating to the Land of Israel from Vilna. Meir and Rivka got married in 1925. Naomi started piano lessons when she was six years old. She was musically talented and began to lead community singing on the kibbutz. She later served in an entertainment unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in the "Nahal" נח"ל Brigade.



Kibbutz Kinneret

Source: Kluger Zoltan, National Photo Collection

In 1955, Naomi attended the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem. She began writing songs in her 20s. After graduating, she returned to the kibbutz to teach music to children and to write songs. Her early songs from this period include, including “The Short Tour,” “The Post Van,” and “Our Little Brother.”



Kibbutz Kinneret (2009)

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Source: Gur Melamend

## 2. Her Rise to Prominence

*“How the cisterns have dried  
The market-place is empty  
And no one frequents the Temple Mount  
In the Old City.”*

-Naomi Shemer (Jerusalem of Gold)



Naomi Shemer joined by other Israeli singers at an event at Caesarea Amphitheatre

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Source: Alpert Nathan, National Photo Collection

Eventually, Naomi moved to Tel Aviv, where she wrote the words to the musical “Five Five” in 1956. She also married her first husband, Gideon Shemer, and had a daughter Lali.

Shemer’s songs are complex and beautiful, yet accessible enough for ordinary people to appreciate and understand. In her songs, she weaves together modern Israeli and literary ideas, in addition to references to Jewish tradition and history.



As a music icon, her songs are very well known and appreciated by most segments of Israeli society. She frequently references ideas about Jews' connection to the Land of Israel. In 1960, Shemer won an international song contest in Italy for a song she wrote while in the IDF called "Hoopa Hey."



Tel Aviv in 1940

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Source: [public domain](#).

### 3. Naomi's Move to Paris

*"That's the beauty of Israel: a word spoken 4,000 years ago can be set beside a word spoken by a child today, and both have meaning for me."*

-Naomi Shemer



Naomi Shemer School in Petah Tikvah, Israel

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Source: Moshe Milner, National Photo Collection

In the mid-1960s, Shemer separated from her husband and moved with her daughter to Paris. While living in Paris, French language and culture influenced her songwriting. She returned to Israel after a few years and married Mordechai Horowitz, an attorney and poet. Horowitz and Shemer had a son, Ariel.

#### 4. Turning Point in Naomi's Career:

##### JERUSALEM OF GOLD



The blowing of the shofar after Israel reunifies Jerusalem (1967)

Source: Rubinger David, National Photo Collection

In 1967, Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, commissioned Naomi Shemer to write a song for the Israeli Song Festival to be held on May 15, the day after Israel's Independence Day, יום העצמאות. Naomi wrote "Jerusalem of Gold," ירושלים של זהב, which weaved together biblical references and modern-day longings of the Jewish people for Jerusalem's Old City. At the time Naomi wrote this song, Jordan controlled the Old City and eastern Jerusalem and banned Jews from

The Six Day War began only three weeks after Naomi published her song, on June 5, 1967. On the 3rd day of the war, IDF paratroopers gained control of the Western Wall and Old City. In response to the unification of Jerusalem, Naomi felt the need to add a new stanza to her song to reflect this victory, and Jews' return to the Old City.

This song became well known throughout the country and brought Naomi's fame in Israel to unprecedented levels. Also, this song became well known among Jews around the world. It gave hope to Soviet Jews of their ability to overcome the antisemitism they faced in their home country. This song was so well respected and revered in Israel that Knesset Member Uri Avneri proposed a bill to make it the official national anthem of Israel. Although the proposal passed the first round of voting, this bill did not ultimately become law. HaTikvah became the official national anthem of Israel in November 2004.

## 5. Change in Tone: Yom Kippur War

Just as Naomi's songs captured the triumphs of Israel, they too addressed the challenging parts of Israeli history. In 1973, when the Yom Kippur War broke out between Egypt, Syria, and Israel, Shemer wrote a gloomy song called "All We Pray For" to the melody of Beatles' song "Let It Be."

This war was devastating for Israel, with over 11,000 Israeli casualties. It changed the optimistic, elated attitude many Israelis had following the Six Day War. "All We Pray For" included a stanza that prayed for peace:

"Then grant tranquility and also grant strength  
To all those we love  
All that we seek, may it be"



Shemer with Defense Minister Moshe Dayan

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Source: Herman Chanania, National Photo Collection



Israeli Chief of Staff David Elazar and Defense Minister Moshe Dayan at an IDF Outpost during the Yom Kippur

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Source: Segev Yitzhak, National Photo Collection

## 6. Israel Prize

Naomi Shemer was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize in 1983. The judges wrote:  
*"The Israel Prize is awarded to Naomi Shemer for her songs, which everyone sings, because of their poetic and musical merit and the wonderful blend of lyrics and music, and also because they express the emotions of the people. Naomi Shemer's melodies are the product of everything she absorbed from her childhood and that flowed from within her due to both her natural and her acquired musical talent.... The unifying factor in all her melodies is their natural, popular musicality... which everyone can comprehend... and this applies to the music and to the lyrics.... For her melodies and her poetry—for all these things—the Israel Prize is awarded to Naomi Shemer."*



President Yitzhak Navon awards Naomi her prize

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## 7. Honors

*"Though it is true that the Bible constituted my bedside reading, I am not a religious writer.... We had a very intimate knowledge of the Bible because of the way it was taught. These words are part of my language and part of my life, and therefore part of my songs."* -Naomi Shemer

While Shemer's health declined in the 1990s, the songs she wrote during this time continued to be widely respected. In 1994, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem awarded Naomi an honorary doctorate. In 2001, Tel Aviv University bestowed the same honor upon her.



Recipients of 1983 Israel Prize Award in Jerusalem Theatre

Source for photos on pages 10 & 11:  
Sa'ar Ya'acov, National Photo Collection

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## 8. Shemer's Final Song and Passing

*"One man will build a bridge to cross a river,  
Another will plant a forest on the mountain slopes.  
And another woman, if times will be tough, will point to the  
horizon and will promise that....."*  
-Naomi Shemer "Good People"

Shemer's last work before she passed away of cancer was dedicated to Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut. She composed this song, called "Ilan," just three weeks before her death.

Naomi's career was not without controversy. Before passing away, Naomi admitted that she had unconsciously based the melody of "Jerusalem of Gold," ירושלים של זהב, on a Basque melody by Paco Ibáñez, a famous Spanish singer and musician, from 1962.



Naomi Shemer's grave

In 2004, days before her passing, she wrote to Ibáñez:

*"I consider the entire affair a regrettable work accident - so regrettable that it may be the reason for me taking ill. You are the only person in the world - besides my family - who should know the truth about 'Jerusalem of Gold,' and here is the truth. In the winter of 1967, when I was working on the writing of 'Jerusalem of Gold,' the song must have crept into me unwittingly."*

Naomi Shemer passed away on June 26, 2004. She was buried in Kibbutz Kinneret's cemetery, close to where she was born and next to her parents. According to her request, there were no eulogies at her grave. Instead, mourners sang three of her songs, including "Eucalyptus Grove."

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon spoke at a Cabinet meeting following her passing, emphasizing the loss of an Israeli icon. Sharon also ordered the Education Ministry to mandate an hour spent at all Israeli schools commemorating the life of Shemer.



## 9. Statements on Naomi's Impact

*"A woman of gold who was able to weave the milestones of the life of the country into her songs and with her giant talent to express the rebirth of Israel in its land. Naomi has left us an immortal legacy of Hebrew works on which many generations of Israelis will be raised."*

-Education Minister Limor Livnat

*"In her song, Shemer bequeathed us landmarks in the life of the country. Her songs voiced a great love for the state and the people of Israel."*

-Israeli President Moshe Katsav

*"[I] admired her ever since I heard her first songs. She was unbelievably sensitive and intuitive. I believe she was the most important artist in the history of Hebrew song."*

-Songwriter Ehud Manor

*"Using marvelous lyrics and melodies, she succeeded in connecting us to our roots, to our origins, to the beginnings of Zionism...Today, when we part with Naomi Shemer, we bow our heads in sorrow and are grateful for the wonderful gift Naomi gave us."*

-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

*"The death of Naomi Shemer has for some years hovered like a little black cloud, a possibility, in the 'light blue yonder' about which she was composing even in her first songs...And even back then, the occasional hint came up of a possible end, or parting one day from the light blue adventure of our lives in this land."*

-Ha'aretz commentator Doron Rosenblum



Prime Minister Sharon and US President Bush (2004)

Source: [public domain](#).

## 10. Sample of Naomi's Music Lyrics

### **FOR ALL THESE THINGS** (על כל אלה)

Every bee that brings the honey  
Needs a sting to be complete  
And we all must learn to taste the bitter with the  
sweet.

Keep, oh Lord, the fire burning  
Through the night and through the day  
For the man who is returning  
from so far away.

#### *Chorus:*

Don't uproot what has been planted  
So our bounty may increase  
Let our dearest wish be granted:  
Bring us peace, oh bring us peace.

For the sake of all these things, Lord,  
Let your mercy be complete  
Bless the sting and bless the honey  
Bless the bitter and the sweet.

Save the houses that we live in  
The small fences and the wall  
From the sudden war-like thunder  
May you save them all.

Guard what little I've been given  
Guard the hill my child might climb  
Let the fruit that's yet to ripen  
Not be plucked before its time.

#### *Chorus:*

As the wind makes rustling night sounds  
And a star falls in its arc  
All my dreams and my desires  
Form crystal shapes out of the dark.

Guard for me, oh Lord, these treasures  
All my friends keep safe and strong,  
Guard the stillness, guard the weeping,  
And above all, guard this song.

#### *Chorus:*

*For the sake of all these things, Lord,  
Let your mercy be complete  
Bless the sting and bless the honey  
Bless the bitter and the sweet.*

Bless the sting and bless the honey  
Bless the bitter and the sweet.

Source: <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/song-alkoleleh-bikel.htm>

### Jerusalem of Gold (ירושלים של זהב)

The mountain air is clear as wine  
And the scent of pines  
Is carried on the breeze of twilight  
With the sound of bells.

And in the slumber of tree and stone  
Captured in her dream  
The city that sits solitary  
And in its midst is a wall.

*Chorus:*

**Jerusalem of gold  
And of copper, and of light  
Behold I am a violin for all your songs.**  
x2

How the cisterns have dried  
The market-place is empty  
And no one frequents the Temple Mount  
In the Old City.

And in the caves in the mountain  
Winds are howling  
And no one descends to the Dead Sea  
By way of Jericho.

*Chorus:*

But as I come to sing to you today,  
And to adorn crowns to you (i.e. to tell your praise)  
I am the smallest of the youngest of your children (i.e.  
the least worthy of doing so)  
And of the last poet (i.e. of all the poets born).

For your name scorches the lips  
Like the kiss of a seraph  
If I forget thee, Jerusalem,  
Which is all gold...

Chorus:

(added after the Six Day War)  
We have returned to the cisterns  
To the market and to the market-place  
A ram's horn calls out on the Temple Mount  
In the Old City.

And in the caves in the mountain  
Thousands of suns shine -  
We will once again descend to the Dead Sea  
By way of Jericho!

Chorus...

Source: <http://hebrewsongs.com/?song=yerushalayimshelzahav>

## Jerusalem of Gold lyrics

## ירושלים של זהב

אֲוִיר הָרִים צָלֹל כִּיּוֹן וְרִיחַ אֲרָנִים  
נָשָׂא בְרוּחַ הָעֶרְבִים עִם קוֹל פְּעֻמוֹנִים,  
וּבִתְרַדְמַת אֵילָן וְאֶבֶן שְׂבוּיָהּ בַּחֲלוּמָהּ,  
הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר בָּדַד יוֹשְׁבֶת וּבִלְבָּהּ חוֹמָה.

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם שֶׁל זָהָב וְשֶׁל נְחֹשֶׁת וְשֶׁל אֹר,  
הֲלֹא לְכָל שִׁירְיָךְ אֲנִי כְּנוֹר.

אֵיכָה יִבְשׁוּ בֹרוֹת הַמַּיִם כִּכְרֵי הַשּׁוּק רִיקָה,  
וְאֵין פּוֹקֵד אֶת הַר הַבַּיִת בְּעִיר הָעֵתִיקָה,  
וּבִמְעָרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בִּסְלַע מִלִּלּוֹת רוּחוֹת,  
וְאֵין יוֹרֵד אֶל יָם הַמֶּלַח בְּדֶרֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם שֶׁל זָהָב...

חֲזָרְנוּ אֶל בֹּרוֹת הַמַּיִם לְשׁוּק וּלְכֶכֶר,  
שׁוֹפָר קוֹרֵא בְּהַר הַבַּיִת בְּעִיר הָעֵתִיקָה,  
וּבִמְעָרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בִּסְלַע אֶלְפֵי שְׁמֹשׁוֹת זִרְחוֹת,  
נִשׁוּב נִרְדֵּי אֶל יָם הַמֶּלַח בְּדֶרֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ.

יְרוּשָׁלַיִם שֶׁל זָהָב...

אֲוִיר הָרִים צָלֹל כִּיּוֹן וְרִיחַ אֲרָנִים  
נָשָׂא בְרוּחַ הָעֶרְבִים עִם קוֹל פְּעֻמוֹנִים  
וּבִתְרַדְמַת אֵילָן וְאֶבֶן שְׂבוּיָהּ בַּחֲלוּמָהּ  
הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר בָּדַד יוֹשְׁבֶת וּבִלְבָּהּ חוֹמָה

'Source: <https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nlis/he/song/pages/song.aspx?songid=369#133,60,893,23>

## THE CITY OF GRAY (העיר באפור)

If you want me to show you the city in gray  
Come and we'll stroll on paving stones

Silently we'll lift our eyes  
to the flying doves

If you want me to show you the city in gray

Then I'll give you my hands  
And we'll descend to the wharf  
Where the wind will cast airborne  
Heaps of fallen leaves  
You'll certainly cover your head with a kerchief  
When I give you my hand  
And we descend to the wharf

Then we'll sit on a bench  
And with the fading light  
If you say, "I've tired of the city in gray,"  
I'll return you on eagle's wing  
Astride clouds  
To your city that awaited you with white houses

Source: <http://hebrewsongs.com/?song=hairbeafor>



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