



## The First Hebrew Detective, David Tidhar, as a Freemason

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### *Abstract*

This article is about David Tidhar. He is an important character in Israeli History, the Hebrew first private detective who had become the first hero of Hebrew detective fiction and historian who was also an important Mason and a historian of Masonry in the land of Israel. The main points in the article are: Introduction. David Tidhar as the first Hebrew private detective; David Tidhar as the first Hebrew detective in the British Mandatory Palestine Police; His character in Hebrew Detective fiction at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; The villain from Corfu; David Tidhar as a member of a secret fraternities; Barkai Lodge of Freemasons in Israel; David Tidhar as a member of Barkai Masonic Lodge; Conclusion.

*Keywords:* David Tidhar, Freemason, Hebrew detective.

### 1. Introduction: David Tidhar as the first Hebrew private detective

David Tidhar (1897-1970) was a detective in the British Mandate Police in Israel. After a career in the police, he opened a private investigation office. He is known as the first Hebrew detective. That is a detective whose entire work was conducted exclusively in the modern Hebrew language.

In addition to this, he was also the first Hebrew celebrity because, after he retired from the Palestine Police, he was the inspiration for a series of imaginary detective books written around his character. That is why he is sometimes referred to by the public as the "Israeli Sherlock Holmes".

Apart from that he was also an amateur biographer and historian. In this context, he wrote an entire encyclopedia documenting thousands of people at the beginning of the Zionist settlement in Israel, without whom they would have been completely forgotten. In addition, as an amateur historian, he wrote comprehensive historical records of the Barkai Lodge of Freemasons in Israel and the Yitzhak Yelin Lodge of the "Bnei Brit" order. In Israel, in September 1970, three months before his death, the World Association of Detectives awarded the association's annual award to David Tidhar for his activities in the field of detectives. The organization awarded him the prize for being the "father of Hebrew detectives" and the pioneer of Hebrew detective literature.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being a senior police officer, Tidhar joined the Barkai Lodge No. 17 of the Freemasons. This Lodge had members who were considered the social, economic, and cultural elite of Tel Aviv.

## 2. David Tidhar as the first Hebrew detective in the British Mandatory Palestine Police

Tidhar worked for several years in the Palestine Police and had great success in capturing criminals. He even wrote a book *Criminals and Sins in the Land of Israel* in the twenties, which described various episodes of his plots against the world of crime in the Land of Israel. This book was the first of its kind in Israel describing the underworld in its various types in Israel.

Among other things, he described the different denominations of the inhabitants of the country and “ranked” their general propensity for crime (which would be considered today and certainly not politically correct). Despite this, and perhaps because of this, the book was very successful and was translated into English and even into Arabic. In 1926, after he left the British police, he opened the first private investigation office of its kind in the town (Zilberman & Geffen, 2001; Tidhar, 1924).

## 3. His character in Hebrew Detective fiction at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

Tidhar was the person who perfectly suited the needs of the Ben-Israel comic writer in creating a character of a new “hero”. He was a man who was known for his courage and his actions as a policeman and detective in the British police and as a result he was the example of the new “Jews of the Land of Israel” that the Jewish settlement in Israel wanted to develop as an antithesis to the European Jew, the economic merchant.

The stories written and published by the Israeli comic writer Ben-Israel in the “Detective Series” as 32-page booklets on which Tidhar’s picture was brilliantly emblazoned were a great success and were sold in hundreds of forms at the cheapest price of five cents (the price of a serving of ice cream and a glass of soda or half a serving of falafel) which he said that the brochures were also within the reach of children.



Image 1.

The first booklet in the “Mysterious Murder” series sold 400 copies. The second booklet “In the Claws of the Human Monsters” has already sold 1,000 copies, and the fourth

booklet “The Maharaja’s Revenge” has already sold 4,000 copies! (And the “dramatic” names likely contributed a lot to the success). Some of the first booklets even came out in two editions, so great was the demand. ... Ben Israel wrote the vast majority of the stories under various pseudonyms such as “A. Ben Sheva” “B. Habakkuk” “A. Shunami” and many more when he was occasionally helped by other writers such as the well-known journalist Uri Caesari. He wrote a story called “The Mysterious Wardrobe at the 1928 exhibition”, with whom Ben Israel quarreled since he wrote a story in two booklets called “The Red Lantern” about a girl who became a prostitute, a story that Ben Israel initially did not want to publish. Another writer was the author of the textbooks for the future Menashe Dobshani who wrote stories such as “The Razor of Blood” and “The Flying Death”. But usually, Ben Israel had trouble finding people to write detective stories according to his modest requirements, although he invited the public to send him detective stories and he received many manuscripts.

Tidhar appears in these stories as an all-powerful detective who, together with his assistants Saadia the Yemenite and Jeremiah (the real detective David Almog who served as Tidhar’s assistant when he was a boy), solves various mysteries that the representatives of the Mandate Police are helpless against. There in the cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa he will speak fighting against cruel criminals like the “vampire” who came to Israel from the crime capitals of London and Paris and led chases after gold treasures and mysterious wills. And it’s all here in the Mandatory Land of Israel in the cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa in streets that were well known to readers such as Ibn Gvirol and Tel Aviv beach as well as more exotic places such as remote mountains around Nablus, caves near the Dead Sea (but no, Tidhar did not discover the scrolls stored there...). There Tidhar faced his monstrous enemies.

#### 4. The villain from Corfu

Like every great detective in literature, Tidhar also had his great “arch enemy”. In his case, it was “the hangman from his core” a particularly cunning criminal and murderer, a Jew who converted to Christianity by the name of Jacob Parzel. He arrived in Israel and there he began a robbery and murder spree until Tidhar overcame him in a struggle that lasted for two whole books and handed him over to the British police.

But that was not the end of the story. Ben Yisrael published another story called “The executioner is alive!” which it turns out that Farzal, who was considered dead after the ship that transported him to her prison sank, managed to be saved and arrives in Chicago where he becomes a senior gangster in the service of Al Capone and again has to gallop to fight him and this time brings him to the electric chair. The name of Judaism in his crimes.

But even that was not the end of the criminal. The figure of the hangman from Corfu was so popular with readers that a competing series “The Volume Library” by David Karsik and Eliezer Karmi published a different story about his life and death called “The End of the Hangman from Korfo” by “Ezer Karmieli (Eliezer Karmi) in which the astonished readers discovered that Ferzel dies after a shootout with the police in Chicago. This is an extremely rare example of a criminal character who became almost as “popular” as the detective character until stories about him appeared in various publications.



Image 2. The executioner is from Corfu as drawn by Uri Fink in the book “The Golem: The story of Israeli comics”

The writing of the Detective Library stories was extremely standard.: In almost every pamphlet, standard passages appeared such as: “The detective (Tidhar) sat in his armchair, filled his pipe with tobacco and was enveloped in heavy clouds of smoke...” or: “Tidhar bent down, in a quick movement picked up a small shiny cuff from the carpet and secretly put it in his pocket (under the eyes of the police, of course).” At the end of the last episode, it always turned out that the object was nothing but a button from the criminal's coat or something similar that led Tidhar to the solution of the mystery.

The plots were almost always taken from stories produced abroad and adapted for local needs.

The readers read this with admiration, Tidhar became in their eyes a kind of giant from whom nothing could be stopped, a larger-than-life man. And the bizarre names of the stories like “Professor Koch’s Bacteria” (which was written for an educational purpose to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of the cure for tuberculosis by a monkey), and “The Secret of the Death Rays,” “Bombs on Mount Carmel,” “The Altar of Blood,” “The Living Dead,” “The Factory for the Dead,” “Headless Man,” “Hell’s Car,” “Vampire of Horrors,” “Vampire’s Revenge,” and “The Blue Man (Mysteries of the Yarkon Sorcerer)” contributed to this.

And the brochures achieved their goal. They have become extremely popular reading material. to a nationwide “plague”. Boys and adults devoted every free moment to following with devotion the new adventures of Tidhar. In many cases, students stopped reading any other literature and even read under the table during school. The teachers confiscated any such booklet that was discovered. Sometimes to read them themselves at home. There was almost no child in the Land of Israel of the time in whose home there was not a pile of thin booklets and usually in a hidden corner for fear of the “evil eye” and their confiscation by angry parents. Also, a lively trade of exchanging pamphlets with friends developed, and thus children read an average of five such pamphlets per week.

An inevitable result was that critics were outraged by the attack in literary journals such as “Moznaim” against these popular pamphlets and defined them as “nausea-inducing vomit pills” or “poison pills”. But they also had defenders like Avigdor Meiri who claimed that detective stories can be used to educate the public to be vigilant and to maintain security against the violence of the Arab enemy with the detective skills it imparts to readers (Zohar & Shavit, 1983).

Tidhar himself also came out to defend the stories about his plots from the wrath of the critics, among other things he mentioned a series of well-known personalities who liked to read detective stories such as Jabotinsky, Haim Weizman, and even the national poet Bialik. He emphasizes the importance of the pamphlets in teaching the reader the theory of self-defense. “When the children are educated to be good Jews and healthy detectives, they will bring benefit to the country ... in detective theory, they learn self-defense just in case. The theory of heroism, orientation in times of confusion, and zero advice,” stated Tidhar. Detective riddles were often added to the booklets of the “Detective Series” whose function was to sharpen the reader’s detective sense and to give him, as Ben Israel wrote, “detective education, which is the key to the

citizen's heart, the sense of detectives and the talent for criminal investigation and the sense of public responsibility." These reasonings were also used by the other detective libraries that arose in the 1930s as an imitation of the original detective library of Ben Israel and Dahar.

These booklets by Shlomo ben Yisrael about David Tidhar from 1931 are the beginning of "real" Israeli literature. These were the first stories that continuously and unapologetically dealt with the Jewish settlement in Tel Aviv and beyond and described the people of the settlement as heroes of the Land of Israel who are not connected in all their parts to their place of origin in the Diaspora.

At the end, Tidhar had ended the series at the end of 1931. He later said that he was tired of the hundreds of boys and girls who came to his office just to see the "Israeli Sherlock Holmes" as well as the adults who disturbed his routine for the same reason, when he walked down the street people would point at him with admiration or follow him with fascinated eyes, followed by the famous detective and hero. He was tired of being "on display" or what we would call today a "celebrity", a phenomenon that was unknown at the time in the town and Dahar was (along with the national poet Bialik) the first example of it. It is also possible to wonder how much the difference between the prosaic and not always successful reality, in which he lived a reality in which he conflicted with the British police on which he wrote various critical articles, and the pamphlets in which he was presented as an all-powerful hero fighting international criminals in full cooperation with the police, affected Tidhar. It is possible that the difference was such that he finally could no longer tolerate it. He continued to work as a private detective and at the same time fulfilled secret tasks for the settlement.

At one point he hired as an assistant a young boy named Uri Avneri. The aforementioned future investigative journalist and editor of "Ha'Olam Hez" learned a lot about matters of investigation and detective work from his work with Tidhar and learned several things at the same time about the ability of the media (in this case detective brochures) to turn a person into a revered "celebrity" and will apply these lessons to the future in his magazine where created celebrity as a mass phenomenon in Israel.

Tidhar's place as the hero of the stories was taken by his former assistant David Almog. In the first book, Almog was introduced as "Yeremiahu" the not-so-smart assistant of the great detective Tidhar. Now he was presented as an all-powerful detective with the former assistant of the Yemeni Tidhar Saadia and also ... Yeremiahu. He was presented as a more active and active character than Dadar and among other things he had the honor of "dying" several times during the series including in the story called "The Death of Detective Almog." Of course, the death was to mislead the various criminals and spies who were supposed to breathe a sigh of relief and lose their caution when they thought that the great coral was no longer following them. The real Almog of course continued to live.

But for some reason, Almog turned out to be a much less popular character than Tidhar, perhaps the original Almog did not have the strength of personality that Tidhar had, the man who was very active in various settlement matters, and this hindered the success of the series.

In all these stories, it did not appear as the sane Land of Israel of the kibbutz and the moshav and the provincial cities as the readers knew it, but as a land where mad scientists, famous actors from Hollywood, spies, communists, gangsters from the USA, archaeologists haunted by a curse, women traffickers, refugees from every corner of the world are infested in droves, and much more. The underworld is Israel. He was presented there as having a brave connection to crime capitals in the USA and Europe including not only Tel Aviv and Haifa but also Alexandria, Damascus, and Beirut. In these stories, the Hebrew detective has close ties with the Mandate Police, who constantly help him recognize his superior skills in the fight against the world of crime, the Arab gangs, and the communist spies who all try to undermine the order of the Mandate.



Image 3. A Yiddish story about David Tidhar

At the end of the thirties, Ben Yisrael moved to the USA and began to publish in the well-known magazine “Farbarts” new stories about the adventures of Tidhar and Almog in Yiddish for an audience no less enthusiastic than the one in Israel. But, this time they were not short stories like in pamphlets but full-length detective novels. At least Eight pamphlets were published about Tidhar plots in Yiddish, bearing his picture.

In Hebrew, Tidhar and Almog appeared together one more time in a full-length book published by Ben Israel in the 1940s called “The Cursed House” in which Almog together with his three assistants Saadia the Yemeni, Yeremiahu (who in the first original stories was himself...) his accomplice Sander, and a wolf-dog named “Gabor” investigate a particularly complicated mystery of the disappearance of a woman and of a house that seems to be haunted. A mystery is finally solved by a horse that appears out of nowhere.

In the last pages, it is not mentioned at all during the book. It was the first (and last) time that the two detectives were presented as collaborators (at least in the Hebrew language). Q. Ben Israel said that when Tidhar started publishing the encyclopedia for the settlement’s history, he asked Ben Israel to stop using his name at all in his stories and Ben Israel agreed and described how Tidhar the great detective decided to stop.



Image 4. “Ged Magen” a series imitating the series about the detectives Tidhar and Almog from the mid-1940s

But, with the establishment of the Jewish state, it seemed that the Hebrew detective finished his job, and stories about him stopped appearing for many years, why is it difficult to say:

maybe the public was now more interested in the adventures of the Hebrew warrior and the Hebrew detective is no longer seen as such an exotic type as it was in the 1930s.

However, Tidhar reappeared in popular literature in the late 1940s, in a children's magazine called "Mickey Maoz", the first comic magazine in Hebrew, edited by the poet Yehoshua Tan Pi, who published cartoon stories by Walt Disney and also a story about "Detective David" which began as a comic and ended as a regular written story and dealt with the exploits of Detective David (clearly Tidhar) in capturing another gang of criminals (Eshed & Pink, 2003).

#### 5. David Tidhar as a member of a secret fraternities

Apart from all these occupations Tidhar somehow found free time to be a senior and prominent member of various organizations "Maccabi" "Bnei Ha'aretz" and as a Freemason in the "Barkai" lodge and a member of the "Bnei Brit" order in the Yitzhak Yelin lodge. He was not only a member of these organizations, but he was also their documenter and published various books and pamphlets about them.

On the Barkai Lodge of Freemasons, he published the pocketbook Barkai Lodge number 17 of the Ancient and Accepted Freemasons in the Land of Israel, arranged and edited by David Tidhar, published by the "Barkai" Lodge, 1945. Includes the internal regulations of the Lodge.

Nevertheless, despite his many writings, there are only a few details regarding his activities in the Freemasons and Bnei Berit. Although he was an important figure, he never reached the rank of president of a Lodge he was not considered that important.

Tidhar was a member of the oldest Hebrew v active to this day – "Barkai Lodge" (Hashar) which was established back in 1906 and was based on a French Lodge in Jaffa which was established as early as 1891 (Tidhar, 1945, 1938, 1961).

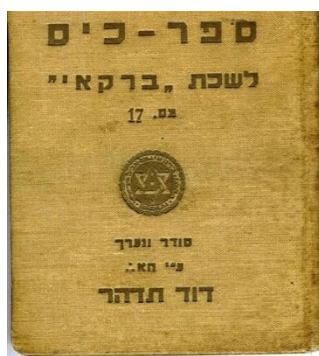


Image 5. The Pocketbook of Barkai Lodge

#### 6. Barkai Lodge of Freemasons in Israel

The Barkai Lodge is a Masonic Lodge operating in Tel Aviv-Yafo. This lodge is under the auspices of the Grand Lodge for the State of Israel of Ancient and Accepted Freemasons. The number of the Lodge is 17. The Barkai Lodge is the oldest among the Lodges active in Israel in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In August 1891, workers from France, who participated in the construction of the Jaffa-Jerusalem railway, established in Jaffa the first lodge of Freemasons in the Land of Israel – the lodge "The Gate of King Solomon's Temple" (Le Port du Temple de Salomon), under the

presidency of Brother Gustave Milo. In the lodge, which was subordinate to the “Misraim” order, there were Jewish, Muslim and Christian members from the Jewish community in Jaffa.

In 1905, a member of the lodge (brother) Moshe Sheinberg initiated the establishment of a new lodge in the Land of Israel, within the framework of the Grand Orient de France (Le Grand Orient de France). On 2 April 1906, the Supreme Council of the Grand Orient in France approved the foundation of the Lodge, which was previously called “The Gate of King Solomon’s Hall”, and the Lodge was established in East Jaffa, with the number 3077 and its name “Barkai” which means “Light the Dawn”.

The source of the Lodge’s name is the daily order of work in the Temple. The activity meetings of the Lodge in its beginnings were held at the house of Brother Yaakov Elhanan Litwinsky in Jaffa, under the presidency of Brother Alexander Piani – who was the first president of Barkai.

In 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, the work in the office was stopped – some of the brothers left the country and others were exiled by the Ottoman authorities. The then-incumbent president of the Lodge, Brother Kesar Araktinci was exiled by the Turkish authorities to Central Anatolia. At the beginning of 1919, President Araktinji returned from his exile and found the Lodge hall – empty. The Turks looted the equipment, the furniture, and everything the house contained. Araktinji restored and rearranged the Lodge Hall in his home in Jaffa, and the Lodge operated until the outbreak of the Jaffa events in 1921 when it was necessary to close the Lodge. At the end of 1924, the Lodge began to operate again, and the number of its members increased. As the third president of the Lodge, the brothers of the Lodge chose brother Dr. Julius Froelich and later, Dr. Yona Ron. Ron emphasizes regularity and permanence in the work of the office, active participation of the brothers, and the multiplication and absorption of highly cultured brothers while paying attention to the spiritual and moral quality of the candidates. Ron also established the Hebrew language as the working language in the office, even though he did not yet know how to write the letters of the language, and he wrote in Hebrew – in Latin letters.

At that time, a group of Barkai Lodge brothers organized themselves and founded another Lodge in Israel – the Moriah Lodge. The events of 1929 once again prevented the continuation of the regular activity of the Lodge. The Arab brothers left the Lodge, and only a few of them returned to it when the riots ended.

The fourth president of the lodge, Brother Haim Harari, later the editor of the newspaper “The Freemason”, increased the cooperation with other lodges, and with the great national lodge that was founded during his tenure. The bloody events in 1936 disrupted the regular work which was stopped again for a short period. Brother Jacob Michlin, the fifth president of the Lodge, hosted in Tel Aviv the Grand President of the Grand Oriental Order of France, Brother Arthur Grossier, one of the heads of the World Masonic Alliance and the President of the Parliament in France.

In 1938, Brother Michlin was sent as a delegate on behalf of the Lodge to the conference of the Grand Orient in France, where the protest of Grand Master Arthur Grossier against the desecration of humanity by Nazi Germany and against the torture of the Jews for not wronging them in the name of racial purity was emphasized.

On 20 January 1942, Barkai Lodge received the sponsorship of the largest national Lodge in the Land of Israel and received the number seventeen – 17 (in gematria: 12). The sixth president of the Lodge, brother Naftali Yitzhak Yelin, devoted the best of his energy and talent to the transfer of the Eastern Lodge in France to the national Lodge in Israel, and to translating the workbooks and much other material into the Hebrew language.



Between the years 1944 to 1946, the years of office of the seventh President Brother Aryeh Oren, and the eighth President Brother Moshe Ophir, additional members joined the ranks of the Lodge and its work. This is not the only Lodge that operates in the city of Tel Aviv. For example, in 1969 the “Ahava” lodge was established, and its president was Meir Shilat (Barkai Lodge Official Website).

#### 7. Conclusion: David Tidhar as a member of Barkai Masonic Lodge

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being a senior police officer, Tidhar joined the Barkai Lodge of the Freemasons. This Lodge had members who were considered the social, economic, and cultural elite of the city of Tel Aviv.

Barkai means “light the dawn” and originates from the Yom Kippur service in the temple egg with a constant sacrifice of dawn, a name which, according to Tidhar, was offered by Yosef Feinberg of the recreations.

Most of our information about Tidhar’s joining the Masonic order comes from his autobiography. He tells in his autobiography *In the Name of the Motherland* (p. 320) that he was initiated into Freemasonry on 26 February 1926, when he was a senior police officer in Jerusalem. The Lodge was then in a period of reconstruction after being re-established in 1924. And since then and probably until his death he was a brother in the office, and usually served as secretary in the Lodge.

But, as mentioned, with all his activity, he did not reach the position of president of the Lodge, perhaps also because he did not have time for it. He says that for a certain period, he served in the role of “charity collector”. He says that he was one of the initiators of the creation of “Kupat Haim” named after the former married brother, the late writer Haim Harari, to give interest-free loans to brothers who are in need at the office.

His most important activity was the initiation and editing of books documenting the activities of the Lodge. He published three of them and included in them a complete list of all the names of the brothers, the internal regulations, and the treasury regulations, the others were recognized by the former president of the Barkai Lodge of Freemasons and Yitzhak Yelin Lodge of Bnei Brit.

For the fiftieth jubilee year of establishing Barkai Lodge, he published a book called “The Jubilee Album” in which there are many details of the Lodge’s plants and its jubilee celebration. Also, a detailed and rare description of a special event held in honor of the well-known author and poet Jacob Cohen *one of national poet Bialik’s friends*.

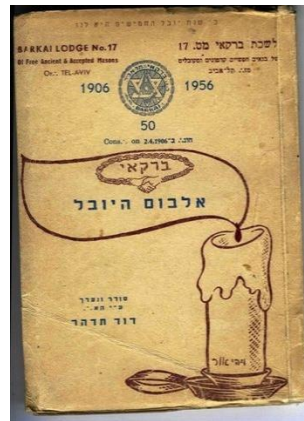


Image 6. The cover of The Jubilee Album of Barkai Lodge

At the same time, as mentioned, he is a member of the Bnei Brith Lodge “Yitzhak Yelin” named after a colleague in Bnei Brith who a member and president of the Barkai Lodge was also. It was Tidhar who organized the above-mentioned Lishka in early 1949 at the initiative of a friend – Judge Shalom Katan. There, too, he was responsible for donations and established a brothers’ fund for loans to brothers in need.

He says that he published two fine monthly magazines on the affairs of the Lodge and Bnei Brith ideas and also published in them a quarterly financial report of all income and expenses. And, about this Lodge, he published three special booklets about the history and members of the Lodge (Tidhar, 1945, 1956, 1938, 1961). And this make Thidhar one of the important historians of Masonship in Israel.

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