

# The Nation State and the Promised Land



***The Nation State and the Promised Land: An American  
Yiddish Writer in Israel, 1949***

by Solomon Simon.

An English translation

of Solomon Simon's book

*Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel*

by David R. Forman.

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## Introduction

Page numbers from *Medines Yisroel un Erets Yisroel*, 1950, Farlag Matones (NY), are included for those who wish to follow along with the original Yiddish text.

p. 5

I spent eleven weeks and three days in the State of Israel. I did not visit the Knesset. I did not see any government ministers or editors of major newspapers, nor meet with officials in general. I did see young people who held important government posts a few times. But these young people were not well known in the wider world. I met with them, not in their offices but among my friends at their homes where I ate and slept. The young people were children or son-in-laws of my friends.

It was not for lack of opportunity that I didn't meet with great dignitaries. Twice I was invited without asking. One government minister even invited me to meet with him at home. My wife was dying to see how a Jewish minister lived. But I very politely declined the honor. I purposely did not want to meet with dignitaries. I did not want to be influenced by their authority and prestige.

I did, however, read all of the daily press every day—ten or eleven newspapers a day, besides the weekly and monthly magazines— and I spent time with ordinary people. I believe that opinions expressed by the “kleyne menshelekh”<sup>1</sup> are more important than the opinions of the exceptional few. Especially important are the opinions that are...

p. 6

repeated by all of the ordinary people who by force of numbers comprise the decisive power in a country.

I spent time with ordinary anonymous people packed in buses, on busy streets, in restaurants, in the Kibbutzim, and in Moshavs<sup>2</sup>. I spent long hours on the coaches where the drivers and unemployed people were, in soda-shops in the evenings, and in bookstores during the day. I stood waiting at bus stations, with long lines of men, women and children. I spent days in cemeteries, stopped at children's playgrounds, and gave up whole evenings to watch youth gatherings. I visited dozens of houses of people in Moshavs, and of simple Jews in the cities, towns and villages of Israel.

I often asked questions that were not particularly tactful. I pressed people to tell me about the smallest details and the most personal matters. Frequently, I was brutally frank and tactless with my critical observations. I did not do it to hurt anyone, but because I wanted to see and hear how the everyday overworked people reacted to my opinions.

Rarely was anyone impolite to me. I was never insulted. But their very direct answers frequently hurt me to the quick, because I saw how far-reaching they were.

I found that certain opinions are accepted among the people without regard to station. If the leaders and the press do not speak them openly, it is merely for tactical reasons. But the seeker can find hints in the speech of the dignitaries and in the writings of the most important journalists.

What is written here is a report of my impressions of the land and of the people. It is not a report concerning important events and political...

p. 7

and economic conditions. I refrain from polemicizing about tactics and avoid critique of temporary difficulties. The great suffering of certain strata are passing things. Here I am speaking of and reporting on fundamental matters, basic principles, that have become the heritage of the people.

The reader should understand that I am intentionally leaving out a lot of things that fill the newspapers. Scandals, disorder, want, economic difficulties, the great pain of the new world, immoral conduct, crime, the black market—these are merely the birth pangs of a young country. Israel has overcome greater difficulties and emerged stronger. For us, what is important is the intrinsic path of the state. Can the State of Israel solve the Jewish Question and the Question of the Jews? Is this current nation-state a continuation of Jewish history or a total break from the Jewish past and the Jewish path in the world? What is the relationship of the State of Israel to the diaspora? How should an American Jew react to this event and to the great accomplishments of the Yishuv?

I will try to provide an answer to these questions, not with speculation and opinions, but by describing what I have seen and felt. Then, let the reader supply the answer himself.

Brooklyn, Cheshvan 5710<sup>3</sup>.

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1. The “little people”, or the poor masses, are both celebrated and caricatured in Yiddish literature, notably by both Mendeleyef Sforim and Sholem Aleichem.

2. *Moshavs*. Workers’ cooperatives. Intentional communities that held some collective property but, unlike the Kibbutzim, allowed residents to own their own houses.

3. Late October – November, 1949



# Chapter 1: Who Would Have Believed It?

*Who would have believed what we have heard? – (Isaiah 53:1)*

In three days I will travel to... I don't know whether I am traveling to *Erets Yisroyl*, the Land of Israel, or to *Medines Yisroyl*, the State of Israel.

I, an inhabitant of New York, lived in the Land of Israel for the first fifty years of my life. As for my birth, I was born in a small Litvish shtetl<sup>1</sup>, and that's where I actually resided. But I lived, like all Jewish children, in the Land of Israel. I dwelt there, one of the Jews of Judah, and every mountain and valley was familiar, near and dear to me.

Of course, I mixed all the generations together. The tents of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—stood right next to the Ivory Palace that Ahab built in Samaria. Beth-El, Beersheba, Lod, Hebron and Yavne were all one city to me. Isaac contended with Abimelech over the fountains at one end of the city, and Rabbi Akiva taught Torah to his twenty-four thousand students at the other end of the city.

But I knew Father Abraham and Mother Sarah personally; I saw Father Jacob meet the beautiful young Mother Rachel for the first time with my own eyes. I spoke to Rabbi Yohanan Ben-Zakai face to face, I knew what color beard Rabbi Joshua Ben Henaniah had, and I would have recognized the compiler of the Mishnah, Rabeynu Hakoydesh, if I saw him walking down the street.

p. 10

When the First Temple was destroyed, I was driven out with the refugees. I remember it as though it was yesterday: Jeremiah walked, shackled in chains, carrying the scrolls of the Five Books of Moses along with the speeches of Isaiah, Amos and Hosea, wrapped in Egyptian papyrus in a small pack tied onto his shoulders. I can see the downcast refugees even now, crying and praying towards Mother Rachel's grave. I hear Jeremiah's voice with my own ears, comforting the Jews and telling them that Mother Rachel is praying for them, and that God has heard her prayers:

*So said God:*

*Restrain your voice from crying  
And your eyes from shedding tears,  
Your efforts for your children will be rewarded.  
They will return from the enemy's land.  
There is hope for the remnant:  
They will return to the borders of their land  
And the refugees will be returned.*

And I returned with them from Babylon.

For months, we dragged ourselves. I remember it clearly: How we stopped when we reached the border of the Land of Israel. A tall man, dressed in a Persian uniform called out: *Jews, be ready! Now we are crossing the border of the Holy Land!* Suddenly, a song was heard. A small, thin little Jew with a snow-white beard and dark hair sang out in a strangely high voice:

*When God overturns the captivity of Zion,  
Truly we are in a dream...  
Great things he has done for us!  
Great things he has done for us!*

The tune was sweet and melodious. A few individuals took up the melody at first, then soon nearly the whole company joined in.

But an old Jew sitting next to me grumbled:

“Great things! What great things? God himself ought to have

p. 11

redeemed us, and look, we are here through the kindness of a gentile, an idolator—Cyrus, a heathen!”

But only a few old people voiced any discontent. Everyone was intoxicated with joy: We were returning to establish God’s Kingdom. All of Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s prophecies would come true, and the speeches of the new exile-prophet, the great comforter, would be made real...

I see the land before me now. This time I have not had the merit to be one of the Yesud Hamala, the founding settlers of the land. Three times I have been one of the crowd. I remember the Aliya<sup>2</sup> of Father Abraham as though from a dream. I was one of his followers. It was so long ago that what remains is no more than a shadow of a shadow of a trace memory. I remember a little more of the Aliya with Joshua. I remember the Yesud Hamala, the return from Babylon with Ezra, quite clearly. The holiness with which the Jews returned from exile was plain to see. I witnessed how they left their worldly possessions, left their property and respected positions behind in exile in order to build God’s Kingdom.

Jews were in exile only a short time, but in that short time they made parts of that foreign culture their own. They knew Hebrew, but they spoke Aramaic and wrote Hebrew with Aramaic letters. They knew Hebrew because God’s word was spoken in that language. But they did not hurry to root out the foreign tongue, which had become their own. The main point, after all, was God’s Kingdom, which had been dreamed up in Babylon. When the rule of holiness was established, then they would decide what to do with the foreign spiritual possessions they had taken on. In the meantime, nothing needed to be thrown away.

Now I am traveling to see that land. What will I find there? Erets Yisroyl, which is continuity, or an Israel that is merely a nation state? Will I see a new Aliya there, an addition to those three Aliyas, or just another government? Have the new pilgrims come to establish a new Kingdom of

Heaven, or have they come to the Land of Israel because they no longer want to be an exceptional people,

p. 12

...because they have grown tired of carrying the yoke and want to become a nation like all other nations?

My heart trembles. Will I find the spirit of A. D. Gordon there, who had the courage to make a break from his own life, and wanted to renew the old Yiddishkayt; which had transformed work into holiness, and had transformed holiness into everyday life? Or will I find the “new Jew” who, having suffered at the hands of the goyisher rifle, has taken a rifle in his own hand and wants to teach the goy a lesson.

I don’t know, I don’t know.

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Here I go, I’m flying. I don’t like the whole business of traveling by airplane. You go in, you sit yourself down and they close the door behind you. You sit and you fly. You neither see nor hear anything, other than the roaring of the engine. The plane is large, but it is packed so full that you cannot move. It is hard to have a conversation with your fellow passengers. Strolling is even harder. The light from the little window of the neighboring seat pierces your eyes if you try to read or doze. Luckily, the flight will not be too long—altogether six-and-a-half hours flying time.

We left Rome at four in the morning. In six hours we would be in the State of Israel. Nobody closed an eye. A strange restlessness came over everyone.

We were approaching the Land of Israel. A song began in the back row. Soon the whole airplane was singing. Suddenly, someone began reading verses from Isaiah [60:4]:

*Lift up your eyes all around and see,  
they all have gathered,  
your sons come to you from afar,  
and your small children carried in your hands  
What kinds of ships are these that fly like a cloud  
and like doves to their cotes?*

I closed my eyes, and my heart shook: These verses were spoken to us, to us who were flying now to the...

p. 13

... State of Israel! In the plane sat Jews from all over the world: Jews from Europe, from all of the Americas; there was even a Jew all the way from Bogota, Colombia.

Someone protested.

“You’re reading the passage wrong. The word ‘ship’ is not in there.”

The reader answered him.

“Look at the commentaries again. That is the correct interpretation.”

I sat with my eyes still closed and it was crystal clear to me that the prophet meant us. The airplane flew like a cloud; little children were sitting in their parents’ arms; a lively little boy named Joel clapped his hands: “Soon, soon we will be in Jerusalem!”

I saw land! Why were the minutes dragging so slowly? Why was it taking so long to land? Why was the pilot just sitting there?

Yes! The plane stopped, the door opened, and we were out.

Two officers in uniform greeted us:

“Shalom, Jews, Welcome!”

I lifted up my eyes. The blue and white flag fluttered over the airfield. On the officers’ sleeves the words Military Police were written in Hebrew.

Yes, it’s true! It’s actually a Jewish state! The four rabbis in our group recited the Shehekhionu blessing in the name of God’s reign over the world. It distressed me not to have prayed for so many years.

Relatives were waiting for the passengers. They waved. We waved back with handkerchiefs. You could hear their cries:

Yankl! Dovid! Shloyme!

We began pressing into a fenced-in area. Four policemen told us where to go. The police with the stripes on their sleeves said, in a good-natured, Lithuanian Yiddish:

“People, don’t push! It won’t help, anyway. Your relatives will have to stand there and wait.”

We were led to where our passports were reviewed. Several among us spoke a fine Hebrew. The officials answered them in Hebrew. I spoke

...to them in Yiddish. I was answered in Yiddish. They spoke the language naturally and unhaltingly.

The officers were not strict. There was no trace of “kazna”<sup>3</sup>. It was not a demeanor of schooled courtesy, but the conduct of genuine and down-to-earth human beings.

It was very interesting when it came to paying duty. My wife and I spread out our seven valises on the long table. A smiling, good-humored young man asked openly:

“Did you bring things that have a duty on them?”

I answered:

“I have brought tobacco (I am a heavy smoker) and silver utensils—a present for my sister-in-law and brother.”

“There are high taxes on those things.”

“It can’t be helped,” I answered. “If it is worth it to pay, I’ll pay. Otherwise, I will leave it behind with you.”

I took out the silverware and the tobacco. He looked at my tobacco.

“A box of cigars and two pounds of tobacco. And where are you pipes?”

I understood the broad hint. I took out my two pipes. He looked them over.

“Those are fine pipes! You can bring the tobacco with you, but I have to consult about the silver.”

He called over a higher official. This one looked examined the silver. He said:

“Very nice! You took your own complete set of silver and brought it for your brother as a present. A fine present indeed! I wish I had such a brother! Go, and may he use it in good health!”

Changing currency was difficult. The room was tight, the table, small and narrow. There was just one person sitting there doing the calculations. The crowd joked:

“The Israeli government might consider not keeping its bank in a little wooden box.”

The agent took their joking to heart, and answered earnestly:

“A year from now, come see what our bank will be like. We’ll be spread over four rooms and have nice soft armchairs for you to sit in. Girls will bang on typewriters and there will be a big calculating machine in the middle of the room. What do you think, we’re going to stay in this hole?”

“Amen!” everyone answered.

My brother was waiting for us with a taxi. We got in and went to Ra’anana. My brother spoke to me, but I didn’t hear him. It seemed to me my sister-in-law was crying: Finally here, after so many years of waiting! But only part of me heard. My ears were still ringing:

“Shalom, Jews! Welcome!”

I could still see the Yiddish-speaking officers.

“We’re in Yidn-Land<sup>4</sup>! In Yidn-Land! You are here, seeing the Promised Land with your own eyes!” called a voice inside me.

*Who would have believed what we have heard?*

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1. Simon was born in Kalinkovitch, in Belarus, then part of the Russian Empire. A shtetl is a small town. By calling it ‘Litvish’ or ‘Lithuanian’, he identifies himself as a ‘Litvak’ — someone who speaks a Northeastern dialect of the Yiddish language and holds certain correlated attitudes. This cultural designation was more relevant to the Jews of the time than national borders.

2. The Hebrew word *Aliya*, which means ‘immigration to Israel’ also means ‘being called up to [read from] the Torah’ during a religious service.

3. *Kazna*. Russian for ‘exchequer’ or ‘treasury’. Simon may mean officials who try to grease their own palms, or are otherwise confiscatory, or he may be indicating arrogance.

4. *Yidn* [yee-dn] means ‘Jews’ and *Land* can mean either ‘country’ or ‘land’. But neither Jew Country, nor The Land of the Jews, has the warmth or directness of Yidn-Land, so I’ve kept the original Yiddish.

## Chapter 2: Children

There's a Jewish saying: "To the drunk, God sends schnapps, and to the spinner, flax."

On the very first morning, I met with four hundred children.

The town of Ra'anana's public school is right next to my brother's house. Only the chicken coops and a row of trees separate my brother's yard from the schoolyard. In the morning, the calling and shouting of children woke me up. I quickly got dressed and went outside. A row of eucalyptus trees stood at the edge of the schoolyard. I sat down on a mound, hidden by a tree, and looked at the cluster of children.

They were playing some type of football or, rather, a kind of combination of football and basketball. I listened attentively to hear what they were yelling, but I did not understand a word. It distressed me a good deal. Consider this: As far as I can tell, a passage of the Talmud is familiar territory and Maimonides is not too heavy reading for me, but I could not even begin to understand what these pipsqueaks were yelling.

It seems, however, that knowing a language is one thing and understanding it when it is spoken rapidly and with an unfamiliar pronunciation is quite another matter. I sat there and contented myself with their happiness.

p. 17

They did not let me sit there for long. They noticed me and headed right over. Thirty or forty children called out in unison. "America! An American!"

I took the pipe out of my mouth and joked, "Yoroyk!" (a green one).

Apparently they did not understand what I meant. I did not say 'yarok', but 'yoroyk'. And they might not have understood what the expression "a green one" [or, greenhorn] meant. They all called out together, "Ma yesh?"

Now I did not understand their question. According to my understanding of Hebrew, you cannot say, "Ma yesh" without an additional word. So, what do they mean by "Ma yesh?" without an additional word? Later I found out that in Israel this expression is used as often as "alright" is in America. "Ma yesh" means: "What does it mean?" "What do you have there?" "What do you want?" "How are you?" "What happened?" "Why?" "What's new?" and on and on.

I sat there and did not know what to answer. Meanwhile, more and more children arrived. Some pelted me with questions, while others whooped and yelled. The noise reached up to the sky.

I closed my eyes, and my heart danced between delight and dismay. Before me stood a couple of hundred children speaking a natural Jewish language, and filled with curiosity about other Jews. But they would have been much closer to me if they spoke my language, the language of my parents and the language that my children understand. And if it was to be Hebrew, why did the

Hebrew have to be pronounced so it sounded like Italian or Arabic? Does the heritage of our holy tongue have no value?

A whistle blew, a drum banged, and a voice called out:

“Line up! Exercises!”

The whistle had to blow several more times before the children assembled themselves. They did their exercises without enthusiasm. After the exercises, the children headed...

p.18

back over to me. The whistle blew angrily, and I pleaded with them.

“Go to your classes!”

They obeyed, but as they left they were still clamoring:

“Visit our school! Come to our classrooms! I’m in Room 7! I’m in Room 6! Don’t forget Room 9!”

I ate breakfast and went over to the school. The principal received me with goodhearted gruffness:

“You corrupted the children today. Visitors come here often, but the children pay no attention to them. Why have they latched onto you?”

I answered playfully:

“You see, I am actually a teacher, and children respond very well to teachers who aren’t teaching them.”

“Nu, so be it. Let’s introduce you to the teachers.”

He led me into the teacher’s lounge. None too big a room but, on the other hand, well supplied with maps and other resources, and with an outstanding collection of textbooks. I even caught sight of Mandlkern’s concordance and a single-volume Talmud.

It was break time, and the teachers were sitting around a table drinking tea. The tea drinking seemed odd to me, but later I learned that it is an established custom in Israel. Every institution serves tea several times a day to its employees.

I met the teachers and spoke to them in Yiddish. Each of them spoke a fine and luscious Yiddish. Only one teacher, the English teacher, insisted on speaking to me in Hebrew. I learned later that he spent several years in North America and was a sworn anti-Yiddishist.



The teachers conferred. All the children wanted to see me. I would go into the last classroom, and two more classes would be brought in, so I could talk with three groups of children.

I went into the class. All the children stood up. It is customary that whenever a teacher or some other honored guest enters...

p. 19

a classroom, all the children stand up. This, I liked.

I surveyed the room. A big blackboard, maps, a wall-newspaper, and pictures of Bialik, S. Ben-Tsion, Herzl, and Sholem Aleichem on the wall. It seemed to me as though Sholem Aleichem was looking at me and saying:

“Look at them — Jewish children! *Mir zol zayn far zeyere beyndelakh!*<sup>1</sup> Sure, they speak an odd language, with some altered vowels, but no matter, no matter. Here are dear Moyses and Shloymes, little Rivkes and Sarahs.”

The teacher introduced me.

“This is a Yiddish writer from America. He will speak to you in Ivrit, Hebrew, but with the exiles’ pronunciation.”

I began to talk, imitating the Sephardic pronunciation, but they did not let me speak. They corrected every other word, and they corrected me out loud to the point where it was impossible to speak.

The head teacher chided them goodheartedly:

“Sabras, have a little respect! He knows Hebrew better than you do. Oh, his pronunciation? So, he hasn’t been in Israel one whole day yet. He just arrived yesterday at five in the evening. Be tolerant! He will learn to talk with our dialect.”

I began again. It was quiet. They began to be interested in what I had to say. As I warmed to the subject, I left off imitating the vowel-shifted Hebrew and spoke with the Ashkenazic pronunciation entirely. Apparently, the group understood my “language of exile.”

I told them about the public schools that Jewish children attend, about the afternoon schools, the Talmud Torahs, Jewish day schools, Yeshivas and Sunday schools. I told them about the Boy Scouts, Habonim [labor Zionist youth group], youth clubs, Young Israel, and children’s clubs associated with the [Yiddish] schools. Then I told them about the Yiddish newspapers, the Hebrew *Hadoar*, and about the three children’s magazines we have.

When I finished, they peppered me with questions. I asked them to talk slowly. The teacher appealed to them not to...

p. 20

...talk beshutef v'bshetef — a word play, meaning quickly and all at once. Some of the questions were quite pointed and interesting.

“Why don’t the American Jews move to Israel?”

“Do American Jewish children know that we fought against seven nations?”

“Why is a special children’s magazine needed for those children who know Hebrew, when there is a good children’s magazine like *Devar L’Yeladim* already available?”

I started to answer their questions, but then came questions about the answers. For example: I told them that there are five million Jews in America. The children were astounded:

“What? So many Jews in America?”

I continued. “Yes, there are five million Jews in America. Imagine if all the Jews in America came to Israel. Where would they fit? There would not only be no room in Israel to build houses, plant gardens and sow fields. There would be nowhere for anyone to stand comfortably.

A boy jumped up and called out: “And in the Negev?!”

“Even the Negev is not big enough to take in all the Jews in America.”

A twelve-year-old girl called out: “And Trans-Jordan?”

Yet another boy spoke: “It doesn’t matter, we will figure something out. We beat seven nations, we drove England out, and you don’t think we’ll figure out what to do with five million American Jews? You don’t know us!”

“Ok, I’ll tell them,” I promised. “But do you think they’ll listen to me?”

“First, you stay here,” called out a boy with a face full of freckles. “Why travel back to America? A Hitler will come there too, and you will end up like the German Jews.”

This was the first time I heard that refrain, but not the last.

Next there was the matter of the children’s magazine. I told them that a children’s magazine in America is completely different...

p. 21

than a children’s magazine in Israel. In America, Jewish children also read English magazines. There they read about nature, mechanics, and other similar things. The Jewish magazines write exclusively about Jewish subjects.

A boy who stood near the door (because so many children had come in from other classes) called out:

“Please write the contents of the latest *Kinder-Zhurnal* on the blackboard.”

I wrote the contents from the May issue of *Kinder Zhurnal* on the blackboard. I gave a summary of each story. A boy in the back row asked, “How can it be that a Jewish writer is writing from left to right?”

“What?” I called out. “I wrote the Yiddish letters from left to right?”

“Not the letters,” answered the boy, “but you made the columns from left to right.”

I answered, “I’m standing on the left side of the blackboard. At first I thought that the contents would only take up one column. But I was wrong, so I added another column.”

The boy did not accept my answer. “Maybe you did it because you read English all day?”

I did not want to contradict him.

Yet another boy raised his hand:

“You have a story there called *Hershele is Not Allowed In*, by P. Bizberg. The writer tells about a boy who travels to Argentina with his father, and they were not allowed in. Why print a foolish story about a boy who wants to swap one exile for another? Israel is open to all Jews, why didn’t he travel to Israel?”

Another boy commented, “You wrote ‘Argetina’ instead of ‘Argentina’”

I started to reply, but the bell had rung for the third time. The teacher raised his hand and said, “Enough for today. We will invite Doctor Simon back a second and third time.”

p. 22

The whole class stood up and called out in unison, “Yofi, yofi!”

Another new word for me. I found out later that Israeli’s say, “Yofi, yofi” (‘beauty’) and not “Yafeh” (beautiful) for a lot of things they like.

This was my first, but not my last, meeting with the children of Israel.

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1. Roughly, “May harm come to me rather than to their precious little bones.”

## Chapter 3: Total War

*“It must be understood that this will be the decisive war, a war drenched in blood. Through it, the struggle between Jews and Arabs, which has matured to ripeness over the course of thirty years since the Balfour Declaration, will be decided.”*

– Uri Avnery, *In the Fields of Philistia: Combat Diary 1948*, p. 11.

*“On the banks of the Jordan and in Sharon, the Arab armies rest. This land will belong to us, and you will be among the builders.”*

–S. Tshernikhovsky, *Lullaby*, 1897, translated into prose.

*“We will go up into the land and we will take it as our inheritance.”*

— Fifth principle of the Ten Principles adopted by the ‘Bilutsim’ [members of a student movement for agricultural settlement in Israel, late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia].

I spent about a week in Ra’anana and soaked up the company of my brother, whom I had not seen for thirty-six years. Mind you, I did not sit in the house. There is enough to see in and around Ra’anana. Then, I was very eager to be in Tel-Aviv, but I did not want to stay in a hotel. First, I am not well-informed regarding hotels in general and I do not know how to pick a good hotel and, second, I preferred to stay with an ordinary Jew in his home: To see how he lives, what he eats, where he sleeps and what kind of newspaper he reads, and to familiarize myself with the typical daily life of a Jew in the largest city in Yidn-Land.

On Shabbes, a man from Tel-Aviv visited me, a relative of a friend of mine. My friend had sent him a small present, so he came out...

p. 24

to pick it up and, while he was there, invited me and my family to his house. He told us that he had a large apartment, that he could give us our own room, and that we could stay there as long as we liked. I accepted the invitation.

Later, I was dismayed that I had accepted his invitation. The people here are over-hospitable. Once when I was traveling with four people, I met a friend by chance and we stopped in. I wanted to arrange a time to come see him for a couple of days. But he would not let us go. We had to drink *gazoz*, a sweet soft drink, then beer, then have a bite to eat. Then the woman of the house made us lunch: a salad, eggs, meat; then, naturally, dessert, which meant cooked fruit or Jello, whichever you wanted; and finally, raw fruits and soft drinks again. Keep in mind that food, other than bread, is very expensive here, and you cannot always get it. You can only get meat twice a week, if that, and only in small amounts. Eggs are just not available—they dole out two eggs a week per person. So you can imagine how we felt. My friend is a teacher. His salary

is modest. We ate, and we choked on it. We were sure that he had given us four days worth of food. But saying no did not help.

It was even worse with the man from Tel-Aviv. He had two children and his entire “large” apartment consisted of two and a half rooms for a family of four. He gave up the nicer room to my wife, my daughter and me. Oh well, I thought. We will just stay over here a couple of nights. There’s nothing to be done. I can’t just pick up and leave without an excuse. How do you insult someone like that? Apparently, it was a big apartment to him. But we had to eat there. The food stuck in my throat. I was afraid we were feasting before the fast, that there would not be enough left over for his household. Luckily, he was not as obstinately proud as other Israelis. He accepted gifts. We gave him two packages of food from the certificates we had brought with us, and we left presents for the children. Our consciences were clean – we felt we had more or less paid for our food. Later we found out we had underpaid after all.

p. 25

Still, it was good that we stayed with him. He was a talkative man and the house was always filled with visitors. All of them, each in their own way, extolled the country and told us about the miracles of the recent war. All of Israel is like that: At their first opportunity, every Jew is ready to tell you about the wonders the young people accomplished, about the heroism that the Sabras showed, and about how wild, depraved, and brutal the Arabs are.

This man was no exception. As soon as he felt a little bit comfortable with us, he began talking about the war, in Yiddish of course.

“You see how quiet and peaceful it is in Tel-Aviv now. Taxis ride around looking for customers, women go shopping, and children are playing in the streets. But a year ago it was hell. Bombs fell right here where you are sitting, right under this window. And not just bombs. You think they couldn’t reach here from Jaffa to here with ordinary rifles, too?”

His wife joined in:

“Never trust an Arab. It may seem like he’s your friend. You’ve known him for years. But he’ll stick a knife in your back the first chance he gets.”

“But our Palmachniks<sup>1</sup> gave it to them. The savages will remember us.”

“You can see, it’s a fine and peaceful city, Tel-Aviv. But as long as the Arabs held Jaffa we were in danger. Arab Jaffa was a spear pointed at the heart of Jewish Tel-Aviv.”

“Those who were not living here when those savages were here cannot understand the pleasure of the current tranquility.”

A man who had come by to have a look at the American joined in with the conversation.

“So, we have no meat! We have no butter! There are too few eggs! There’s barely enough milk for the babies! So what? Everything is better than it was at this time last year. We are rid of the English. The Arabs are gone. We are our own bosses, and our lives are secure. What more can we ask for?”

“We have it good and it is going to get even better. We will show the world what we can accomplish.”

p. 26

The man who came to see us chuckled and began:

“Listen to this, it’s a good one. In Jaffa there was an Arab, a businessman, well-known all over the country, a big deal, a \*\*\*! So, he ran away. He is sitting in Beirut with his bundle of keys, and he guards those keys like the apple of his eye. He ought to see his granaries, his shops, his house and his great big factory now! There’s not a trace left. The fool thinks that locks could keep us out.”

I didn’t join the conversation or ask questions, but listened and said nothing.

My host continued explaining the situation to me:

“We wanted to reach a compromise with the Arabs all along. They didn’t want to. They felt we had come as invaders. The truth is, we never wanted to take the whole country. We only wanted to settle here. When the English left, the Arabs thought, *Now is the time to drive the Jews into the ocean*. It was lucky for us. We could openly battle with them. If you want a war, go ahead!”

His wife joined in. “People told them, *Run away!*”

“Who told them?” I asked.

“The stupid Arab leaders and the English, kept on yelling to the Arabs, *Run away!* What was their calculation? That it would be easier to drive the Jews into the ocean. And we said, *Don’t run, fools, we will not harm you*. But they did not listen. So, we thought, *Fine. You want to run? Run! We’ll help you. We’ll scare you a little*. Let the savages believe that we won’t be any better than they are. And the Etzelniks<sup>2</sup> goaded them with bayonets.”

Now, his son joined in, speaking in Hebrew:

“The Arabs spread a rumor that we had some kind of an atomic bomb. We did not deny it. Let them think so. After “Deir Yassin” they spread a rumor that we had murdered...

p. 27

women, children and old people<sup>3</sup>. We did not deny it. On the contrary, the Etzelniks bragged about it and threatened more.”

“You and your Etzelniks and Kherutniks<sup>4</sup>,” spat out his father. “Big achievers.”

“It helped,” answered his son. “The Arabs comprehend the language of Revisionism a lot better than all your old people’s blather about justice and understanding. Why don’t you go ahead and show our guest how we conquered Jaffa. Let him see. Then he’ll understand for himself why they ran away.”

“You know, that’s an idea. At dusk, when it gets a little cooler, we’ll take a walk from Tel-Aviv to Jaffa.”

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At dusk, the apartment owner took us for a walk. We walked via the beach from Tel-Aviv to Jaffa. The man strolled on the asphalt sidewalks boasting on and on about the beauty of the beach. In fact, it’s something to brag about. The sidewalk is entirely paved and twice the width of the sidewalk at Coney Island, three or four times as wide in places. Fine, bright-colored benches have been installed everywhere. On the side towards land, there are magnificent hotels three and four stories high. The hotels have large, eye-catching patios with cafés for the beachgoers. The sandy beach is clean and tidy, with rows of chairs and umbrellas to block the sun. Here and there the walkway is so broad that there is a café or a flower bed in the middle.

The man talked the whole time, telling us the history of every hotel and building. Take a look at the wall of that brown hotel. Do you see a hole? That’s where a bomb fell and killed an old Jewish woman.

We were approaching Jaffa. My companion grew more talkative:

p. 28

“No Jew could show himself in this area. The savages stood on the roofs of Jaffa and shot and killed people. Nu? Our guys did not take it quietly. But after weeks of exchanging fire, we realized that it could go on like that forever. Our boys and girls came, some Etzelniks, but mostly Palmachniks [regular army], and they thought up something useful: Blow up the bandits’ houses. We did not have any cannons, but we had more than enough dynamite. Hand grenades, too. So, we snuck up to the houses at the risk of our lives, and blew up whole streets. Tel-Aviv was saved. You will soon see.

I saw. At first individual demolished houses, and then whole streets in ruins. There were heaps of cement on both sides of the road. Here and there was a partly collapsed wall, an iron balcony, or stairs from the inside of a house. The street was cleared for automobile traffic, but on both sides were ruins on top of ruins.

“You see this fine piece of work? Lives were sacrificed, but Tel-Aviv was saved. Here, do you see this nice floor made of beautiful colored ceramic tiles? This was the Arab army headquarters.

Our boys swam here at night. The only way to get here was through the ocean. They swam up, set up some explosives and – bam – no more building and no more of the bandits' staff.

We walked a fair number of blocks. Half-intact houses began to appear, occupied by immigrants. I stopped at a house where a man stood over an oven, cooking “falafal”—a kind of food that looks like chopped meat cutlets, but in fact is made from vegetables and spices. He called out his merchandise to the tune of Goldfaden's operetta, in Yiddish of course:

“Falafel for sale, Jews, sweet as sugar! Melts in your mouth! Spices to treat your nose!”

I spoke to him:

“What kind of work is that for a Jew in Israel? Workers are needed in the fields and on the roadways, and a broad-shouldered man like you has taken up selling falafel!”

He answered me in a fine, rich, Besarabian Yiddish:

p. 29

“I have only been here for six months. I work off the books, building houses. I stayed in the immigrant transit camp for just two months. I don't like taking welfare. But one has to have a goal. So, I sell falafel in the evening and take in a couple of more piasters. They will come in handy. After all, I came here without shoes, clothing, or household goods; my family naked and without a stick of furniture. There is need and more need. Go ahead, take a look at my apartment, and you'll see what we need.”

I went into his rooms. There was bed, a pair of crates to sit on, and a barrel covered with a board to use as a table. The walls were half shot out. Half of one wall was newly bricked.

His wife proudly showed me the wall:

“You see this? My husband, may he be well, repaired it himself. He has two golden hands, and no work is too hard for him. He mixed the cement and laid the bricks late at night after work. Here in the corner we've scrounged up bedding for our little girl. But life is hard.” She sighed.

My companion who lived in Tel-Aviv blurted out in distress:

“For us, it was harder to live. When we got a *tserif* (a room slapped together with boards), we were lucky. You have two big rooms. Once you're set up, you will live like royalty.”

His wife answered:

“Of course we have it better than in the camps. And, thank God, we are in Yidn-Land now. We don't have to live in fear of the Goyim. But when I remember the years before the war, when we lived like human beings, well, a sigh comes out.”



“No matter, we’re going to have it good!” the man answered. “We have overcome worse problems.”

“Amen,” she answered and went back to her ‘business’. We left them, and went on.

The houses along the road were no longer as ruined. Now, only a window or a door was missing here and there, or maybe half a roof was torn off. But the houses were occupied. Not a room was...

p. 30

empty. There was feverish activity everywhere. Nearly every store had someone hammering nails, installing a door, patching a ceiling, or repairing the sidewalk.

My companion told me, “As soon as the battles were over, people starting schlepping. People dragged over whatever they could find. Afterwards, people began carrying doors and windows. They even tore off roofs.”

The city became more and more lively and the houses more intact. In the center, the city was untouched. Display windows were lit up, the stores decorated, the cafés full and the buses packed. People spoke all sorts of languages, but mostly Yiddish and Hebrew. People were boisterous, yelling, joking, and debating.

We walked on and on. The city bubbled in happy commotion. I said to my companion: “They could have fought and fought. It could have taken months to clear the streets.”

“That is actually the miracle,” he answered.

We rode back. The bus was packed with young people singing and teasing each other. I sat on the back seat with my eyes closed, thinking:

*We took a country and conquered it by force. The enemy ran away. And, right then, a passage came to mind. In Israel, scriptural passages are often on the tip of the tongue. I remembered a verse from Deuteronomy:*

*God will deliver to you the enemy who opposes you. They will be driven from you. They will come against you from one direction and will scatter from you in seven directions. [Deut 28:7]*

It was good and dark when we got back to Tel-Aviv. The streets were lit and filled with the happy populace. I got out of the bus. Children were singing and dancing in an empty lot.

If you have not seen Jewish children dancing on the streets of Israel you have not seen happiness. Their dance was rhythmic and organized, and the singing was powerful and harmonious. The children stood in a...

p. 31

circle and sang and clapped their hands. A boy and a girl waltzed into the middle of the circle. After a while the boy danced away from the girl and touched a girl who stood singing. They danced for a while, and the girl picked out a new boy. So, the dancers traded off until every child had danced.

Again, a verse landed in my mouth, this time from Zachariah [8:5]:

*And the streets of the city will be full of girls and boys, playing out in the streets.*

I looked at the children and thought with terror, *It could have gone the other way!*

After getting used to the tune, I began to pick out the words. The children were singing a war song:

“Go out and see, daughters, soldiers are in the settlement! Go out, go out and see, daughters, every brave boy is a soldier!”

I thought some more. *Jewish children are singing war songs again, just as in the time of Saul. Back to the sword! Can we deny the last couple of thousand years and return to those olden days? We, the bearers of justice, righteousness and compassion; can we go back to that condition and once again be among those whom people can bring complaints against and demands for damages?*

Apparently I had voiced my thoughts out loud, because I heard my companion answer me:

“No matter. We don’t always need to be the ones who have cause for complaint against the world. Let them have complaints against us once in a while.”

That night I read Uri Avneri’s book *On the Fields of Philistia*, which is written in the style of a war journal. He, like all the young people of Israel, understood the logic of the war, but he made a mistake when he said that the war began soon after the Balfour Declaration. The war began a lot earlier than that, with the arrival of the Bilu’im [in the 1880s], and maybe even earlier.

The Jews have won this war, and they have set out onto a new path, the path of all the nations of the world.

Few of us grasp this. Even fewer want to admit it. But it is important for us to take in and understand.

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1. Palmach– “The elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv [Jewish community] during the period of the British Mandate for Palestine.” –Wikipedia

2. *Etzel* [also called *Irgun*] An extreme paramilitary group that separated from the Haganah, itself a paramilitary group that would later become the Israeli army.

3. [translator's note] In fact, they had.

4. Herut. The political arm of the Etzel/Irgun.

## Chapter 4: Immigrants and Residents

I was only in Tel-Aviv for four days. On Shabbes<sup>1</sup>, I went back to my brother. In the meantime, I thought I would visit the Immigrant Transit Camp, the camp for those who had just been brought over, which was near Ra'anana.

About a quarter of a million immigrants have been brought to Israel over the last year. In the abstract, anyone can understand the enormity of the accomplishment. Every thinking person will admit that setting up camps for so many people would be no easy feat, even for a rich and well-developed country. When a poor country like Israel takes in so many new immigrants — amounting to a third of its population — you can imagine the difficulties. Then, too, the immigration has not been selective. Everyone has been taken: Healthy and unhealthy, young and old, psychologically normal and abnormal people, those suited to their new circumstances and shattered human beings who will never be able to adapt to a normal healthy life. So a visitor to a camp ought to understand that it is not a very pleasant place to witness. This should not be a shock.

But theory is one thing and reality is something else. When the average person visits a camp, he in fact walks away a shattered person, in a state of shock. No one can blame him. But birth is not...

p. 33

a very pleasant phenomenon. A person who does not have strong nerves should not visit a birthing room.

I do not know how large the immigrant camp near Ra'anana is in area. It seemed to me as though there were many more people there than in Ra'anana itself. I entered the fenced-off camp (the gate is always open and no one is guarding it), and as far as the eye could see I saw *tsrifim*, barracks or, really, huts with holes for windows, clapped together from boards, and *ohelim*, tents.

I went with my daughter Miriam, a thirteen-year-old girl. We stood dumbstruck next to the *tsrifim* and *ohelim* and looked. Long rows of one-room *tsrifim*, with beds set up right next to one another, twelve people per *tserif*. The tents were dark inside, furnished with beds and crates. The tents held six people.

It was hard for me to start talking to people. Here I come, my belly full, a free man from outside, sticking my nose into other people's problems.

The immigrants in that camp were our Jews, who had come from the German and Austrian camps. A small portion of them from Shanghai. A large percentage of them were over forty years old. Here and there were an old man and an old woman. More than a few of them had numbers tattooed on their arms. But they talked readily. Before I looked around, there was a circle standing around me. A man with a number on his arm pleaded his case to me:

“I don’t know who you are, but the more people know, the better for us. The Kulak is still in charge. Who do you think is sitting here in our camp offices? The same *kapos*. First they tyrannized us in the concentration camps, and now in these camps. Have you heard about the great Greenbaum’s son?”

A young man interjected. “You’re holding forth already? And always with the same litany — Greenbaum’s son. You do know that he was killed fighting for Israel? He paid in full for his sin!”

“I will hold forth if I want to, until someone listens to me. So, he redeemed his sin. But what about the others? Committees come from America,...

p. 34

supposedly to look into things, to investigate, and what comes of it? Not a thing. Why? Because someone always accompanies them. Even Leyvik and Efrat came, dressed like generals, and always accompanied by a troupe of lackeys.”

Here, I interrupted. “They had to dress in uniform. Otherwise, they would not have been allowed in to visit the camps.”

“Who would have stopped them from sneaking into the camps late at night, or early in the morning, sitting on the edge of the bed, and listening to our grief and pain, to uncover the swindles and the scandals?”

Another young man with a number on his arm turned to me:

“I’m telling you, that man is talking nonsense. What kind of complaint can anyone have against Leyvick? He asked questions, did his research, and spoke with a lot of us. He listened to enough justified complaints and unjustified complaints. No argument can be had with Leyvick. If we could only say the same about all the commissions.”

A short, stout, freckle-faced man began to speak rapidly, as though he was afraid people would not hear him out:

“And I’m telling you that Leyvick did not write the whole truth either. He, too, was with the *pkidim* (officials). He ought to have written that shirts had been sent from America, and the officials wore them. That they had sent meat, and the officials ate it. Have you gotten many meals from the charity boxes? Wasn’t a whole warehouse of American merchandise destroyed in Cyprus, which the officials had been hiding for themselves, to speculate with?”

“But we were not in Cyprus, and neither was Leyvick,” the first young man broke in, “it’s all noise. How could he have written about things that happened long afterwards?”

“Later or earlier,” said the first man, “no one has come to us as one of our own, but all of them as emissaries, official persons. Now this guy,” he pointed at me, “I like. You can see he is an

American. I would swear that he is a Yiddish writer. He knew right away who Leyvick is, and he knew about Greenbaum's son. Yes, he's a writer. And how did he come to us? Alone,...

p. 35

with his daughter, not accompanied by commissioners. He will know the real truth. Tell him, my fellow Jews, how good you have it."

By now there was a considerable crowd around me. A young woman called out:

"What good does telling stories do? Let him see with his own eyes. Come and look at my tserif: a three by three hole, with eleven people living in it. Three married couples, that's six people, and (she counted on her fingers) two children — that makes eight — and three unmarried men make eleven people. Nu? Everyone sleeps together in that hole. The beds take up the whole room. There's no place to turn around. Under our beds are trunks, chests, and suitcases. How clean can it be? Flies, dirt, and mud. Our officials, great brains that they are, couldn't come up with a way not to put married and unmarried people in the same room. Only if someone has patronage, *Vitamin P*?!"

"And you had it better in Germany?" the young man countered.

"Of course it was better. There we could do something, trade, make an easy penny or two."

"Your easy pennies," said the young man disgustedly. "You could have stayed in that damned country?"

"We could have held out there for years, and then gotten a visa to America or to Argentina. But no! They came to us: *Jews, come to Israel! The nation is waiting for you! We need you! Your children will have a future!*"

Someone else joined in the conversation, like a soloist in a well-rehearsed choir:

"We came for the benefit of our children. Here, look at this food!" He brought out a plate of food.

"Look. A little grain porridge mixed with God only knows what. A dot of margarine, a small piece of cheese, a half bar of halva and chopped up bits of cucumbers and tomatoes. It's inedible. Dry and without any flavor. In this heat! Yes, we have enough bread. Huge hunks of it. OK, so for us it doesn't matter. But is this food fit for children?"

"Our children are dying like flies. There is no hospital. There is a doctor, but only when you don't need him. They give you a glass of milk a day, but where can you keep...

p. 36

it? In this heat it goes sour. It's useless."

“They brought us here like Moses leading the Jews into the desert, so we would die off, and some of the children would survive to build the country.”

“It would have been better if the ship that brought us here had blown up and drowned us all.”

“A supposedly democratic government, and they don’t let anyone leave the country.”

“If they opened the gates of the country, they would see how many of us would stay here to starve.”

“Good Goyim would treat us better. They are evil! Evil!”

“Not a word of comfort, only empty talk from the officials, and starvation!”

A young man jumped up angrily:

“You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! You are telling lies! You are not starving. The garbage pails are full of bread! People who throw away bread are not starving. When we were with the Russians, we would have kissed the hems of the peasants’ coats for the bread going to waste in the garbage cans here. How long have you been here? No one has been in this camp for more than six months. Hundreds of thousands of Jews have landed in Israel. The country is poor, but where are the people who have been here more than seven months? They have been taken care of. You will be taken care of, too. Imagine if fifty million people came to America. That would be the same as a quarter of a million here, a third of the population. You are not fair. You...”

“Aha. look who is on the take,” called out the man with the freckles. “Have you been paid off? Now you’re a little camp official? They do it here like they do over there in Germany. Someone complains and they shut him up by giving him a position.”

“What are you talking about?” argued the young man. “You’ve known me for years. Have I shoved my way to the front of the line? I have a number. I’m alone, left with nothing and no one. I sleep here, and I eat here. Do I live better than you do?”

“So, tell us, where is the money they sent from America? You have it good. You are young, still healthy and strong. You can live on food like this. But what have the children done wrong? Why...”

p. 37

aren’t they being taught? Why isn’t anyone paying attention to them? They are the future, after all. They’re the ones who will build the nation. We ought to be given work.”

“We’re in a bad way. There is no end to our wallowing. Charity, and more charity. We don’t want to live off charity any more. We want to give to charity.”

People began pressing in from all sides. It was getting too dense and too chaotic. I backed out of the group, and went off to see the kitchen. On the way we looked in the *tsrifim* and in the tents. Every room and every tent was crammed over capacity. It was narrow and suffocating. They had not exaggerated. Pale children wandered all around the camp, without any boisterousness. There was no sign of any systematic interest in the children.

My daughter and I went into the kitchen. A smell of spoiled food hit us in the face, nearly taking our breath away. The floor was not clean. There were flies everywhere. Two rows of long, slightly greasy tables lined with benches stretched the length of the room. A hundred people sat at the tables. Outside the kitchen windows the immigrants waited their turn with plates in their hands.

We went up to an opening. Below was the kitchen. People were busily working in there, grouped around the large kettles. Two women were serving food to each person who had a ticket.

The ticket was handed over, and one of the women served out a couple of pieces of cooked fish, margarine, chopped cucumbers, a little cheese, and a piece of halva, along with several substantial slices of bread. In addition to the hot meal that was served onto the plates, there was bread, margarine and halva set on the ledge of the kitchen window, which was full of crumbs and leftovers. The food was served extremely quickly. The only few words that I heard from the server were, "Do you want more bread?"

A woman came with three tickets for the three members of her family. She asked them to put all the food on one plate. The server followed her request. The woman stayed standing there. She wanted a couple of more pieces of fish. Without looking at her, the server said:

p. 38

"You know, you would have to pay sixty g'rushim in the *shuk* (market) for a portion like this.<sup>2</sup>"

The woman became angry. "Are you giving me eggs? Am I asking you for Marzipan? What, are you giving me charity out of your own pocket?"

She noticed my daughter and me, turned to me and said quietly, "Oh, so you are the chairman of the secret committee from America? (By now it seems I had already become the head of a secret committee). Here, see how they are treating us." She turned to the crowd:

"Tell him the truth. More handouts. More charity. More people treating us like beggars and bums. They portion out our food through a window, and don't even give up forks and knives!"

"Tell them where the forks and knives that were out there went," came a voice from the kitchen.

"You stole them! It was you!" the woman answered.

I sat down at a table. A group immediately formed around me. Again I heard the same complaints as before, along with stories of suicides, of people who snuck out of the camp and



back to Europe, of broken promises, and the main complaint above all: “Why didn’t they tell us the truth? Why did they bring us here, old and sick as we are? Why couldn’t they have left us be?”

A man with a small black beard and an unusually peaceful demeanor sidled up to me and began speaking calmly:

“I hear that you are a writer, sent from America directly to us. That you came here without commissioners. So, write the truth of what I’m telling you word for word. I never expected the holocaust survivors to work or even to be capable of working. But I’m telling you, we do want to work. Those who have gotten out earn their bread honestly. But it is hard, and it’s particularly upsetting that we were fooled. We were promised the moon. We were not told the truth. We have fallen into despair. But under the circumstances...

p. 39

the situation is actually not that bad. You can see — no one, heaven forbid, is starving. And we have a roof over our heads, besides. So, what’s the problem? We’ve gotten tired of sleeping twelve to a room. We long for a touch of home, a little normality. We’re sick to death of getting our food through a window and eating all together at bare, uncovered tables, without utensils. We long for a napkin.”

“But I was told,” I said, “that no one stays here for more than six months. After that, immigrants are being settled in the abandoned Arab villages or in the towns. Whoever wants to can go to a kibbutz, or in a workers’ collective.”

“That was all true up to now,” the man replied. “Now the situation is getting harder. There are fewer jobs. The immigrants are losing confidence. We don’t want to go to the Kibbutzim. We don’t want any kolkhozes [collective farms]. We’ve had enough of communal living. It’s not for us.”

“Where are they going to put us?” someone asked. “Where? And suppose they even gave me an apartment, what would I live on? I will starve to death.”

Another man broke in, and another. It became such a commotion that I could not hear anyone. I got up and began to leave. My daughter, pale as chalk, held onto my hand hard.

We were quiet the whole way home. When we got to my brother’s, I sat down on the veranda, shocked and upset. My daughter went into her room, threw herself on the bed with her face buried in her pillow, and broke down sobbing. I let her cry. To tell the truth, I was jealous of her. If only I could had a good cry. It would have been easier for me.

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Friday night an old resident, a Jew who had lived in Israel for around thirty years, invited us to dinner. After we ate, friends and relatives of the old resident came to meet the American. Later in the evening, the subject of the immigrant camps came up in the conversation. I spoke bitterly about the situation of the new arrivals. To my surprise, the...

p. 40

residents were not particularly moved by the sufferings of the immigrants. On the contrary, every one of them waved it away, and said, more or less in unison:

“They don’t know how good they have it.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “How do they have it good? Deliver us from such a good.”

The eldest began:

“Their situation is wonderful, compared to what we had to endure before we managed to slog our way through to what we have now. They get food and drink and a roof over their heads. True, it’s lousy food and drink, but they are not hungry the way we were hungry. They have a tserif and a tent. We often had to sleep in the open air. The difference is just that we came here to build a country. They came here because they were attacked, and if they stay there, they will be attacked again.”

“You tell us they are given food with no utensils. Ask them what happened to the forks and knives they were given in their first days there. I could tell you stories that would make your hair stand on end. But it’s not necessary. You saw what they are made of yourself. Take, as an example, the business about married and unmarried people living in one tserif, or in one tent. Yes, that is awful. But we tried all kinds of ways of putting them in families, and they wouldn’t cooperate. Try getting someone out who had already grabbed a spot in tserif, even with police. Once in, they would bring in a relative or someone they knew from the camps. They muddled things up so badly that the officials just washed their hands of it. In the new camps, we are going to try to set it up differently.

“As for the children... We have terrible problems with this. You know that they won’t let their children out of their sight? Once, several children got sick with measles. So, they had to be taken to the hospital. There was practically a riot. We prevented a panic only by letting the mothers sleep in the hospital. But you know the camp is right next to the city. A doctor can be called when he’s needed, and in fact, they do.”

“We promised them happiness? Yes, maybe we fooled them a little. We did it for two reasons: They had to leave the camps where they were, and we needed them here. We needed to settle the...

p. 41

abandoned villages and towns. We have to occupy the abandoned land. The Negev must become Jewish. If not... I won't even speak of it. They did not understand that they cannot stay in Germany even if the [DP] camps there are not so bad now. We see a little farther. They don't understand, but only see what it's like now. So, we fooled them a little. We did not tell them about all the difficulties they would have here. We are not disappointed in them. We knew we would have ups and downs with them. But in the end, they will adjust and settle in. OK, some will fall by the way. *No one gets a country handed to them on a silver platter*, said Ben-Gurion.

“But in order for you to have a complete picture of the immigration problem, it would be worthwhile for you to visit an abandoned village that has been settled by the new immigrants. There you will hear a completely different tune.”

Saturday I went off to visit “Khirbet Azzun”, an Arab village near Ra'anana that the Jews had settled with immigrants. The resident from Ra'anana came along with me.

As soon as we left Ra'anana, he waved his hand and pointed to the four sides of a field.

“All this was Arab ground. Jews who passed through could never be sure of their lives. They say that the Arab people would have wanted to live with us in peace if the effendis and the English had not stirred them up. I do not know if that's true. A Jew has never been secure in Arab territory. In general Jews could not trust the Arabs. They might seem to be good friends and neighbors, but you could never be certain that he would not stick a knife in your back (this formula I heard everywhere and from everyone in Israel). This little piece of land where we are walking belonged to a rich Arab. He was an anti-Semite, a bad one. The Keren Kayemet [Jewish National Fund] wanted to pay him ten times what the land was worth. But he would not sell to Jews. Now his great orchard is abandoned and dried up, his fine house is locked, the fields withered. He ran away and is sitting somewhere in Damascus or Beirut, holding onto his keys. Millions of dunams<sup>3</sup> of land like this were redeemed without need of the blue Tzedakah boxes.

p. 42

“The village “Khirbet Azzun” was a poor village. You will see the houses that remain are not worth much. The rest had to be torn down. They were not good for anything and streets needed to be paved. An Arab village does not have any streets. Today you will see a fountain that the English made for them. To hell with both of them. We will pipe water here from Ra'anana. There is another decorated fountain like this right near Ra'anana. We will modernize it and integrate it into our water system. People won't have to agonize over a pail of water.”

A half-built house was springing up in the middle of a field and a man was there putting on the roof. I was surprised. “On Shabbas?” My resident shrugged his shoulders: “Let that be his worst sin. He is a demobilized soldier. All week he works on the water system with me. In the evenings, he is building himself a house. Saturday is a free day for him, so he grabs the opportunity.”

We walked on and on. We sank up to our ankles in sand. The resident's mouth never stopped running.

“So, take a look at how this nation lived, how close to God they were! They lived here for hundreds of years, and never laid out a road. We’ve been in Ra’anana for a little over twenty years, and look at our k’bishim (highways)! Is it any wonder that our Sabras beat them one-two-three? It was a war between the twentieth century and the sixteenth.”

“Who planted the cactuses at the side of the path?” I asked.

“We are coming into the village now,” my companion answered, “and wherever there is an Arab village there are cactus fences. We are chopping them out. The cactus draws too much juice from the earth. We are planting cyprus, boxwood, or some other *geder-chai*, living fence. And here is the village.

We walked up onto a hill where there was a boarded-up well. A short distance from the well were scattered stones from the ruins. We arrived at a patch of cleared ground. There was a very fine chicken coop with a chicken and a rooster, closed in a...

p. 43

cage. The rooster was speckled, with a red head, the chicken completely white. A bright white egg shone out from the side of the cage. Two goats were tied to a pole that had been hammered into the ground. A man stood next to the chicken cage and looked at the egg. We stopped and asked him, “Is it yours?”

“Yes, mine,” he answered. “You see, they gave us sixty pounds (about one hundred and eighty dollars) when they settled us on the land. I bought the coop, the chicken, the rooster, and the two goats. We have six pounds left. This is the first egg.”

“And the goats give milk?”

“A kilo and a half.”

“And you can get by on that?”

“Well, I’m working on the road crew. But the yard has to be leveled, and my little house is a sieve. I have to renovate it before the rains let loose. I’m up to my ears with work to do. I don’t know where to start. So I stand here looking at my first egg. It’s Shabbes after all.”

We went down the hill. A man had wound wire around tall poles to fence off his place. We went up another little hill. Here there were several houses, right next to one another, freshly-plastered and with new windows. A beautiful little boy lay in a homemade cradle, playing with his rosy little feet. An old woman welcomed us:

“You came to have a look at our palace? There’s nothing to look at.”

The old resident answered her:

“I’ve brought a guest here. He’s an American. He wanted to see how Jews have settled in an abandoned Arab village.”

A young woman in her twenties came out of the house and, following her, a tall, blond young man, as handsome as a movie actor. Happily, the woman said:

“Came to look at us? First just take a look at our treasure. You know, he was born here, in Israel. He is a little Sabra. He will not suffer the way we suffered. He is home in Yidn-Land, the Land of Jews.

p. 44

The yard was cleared of stones. In the middle of the yard stood one small sapling. “Did you plant the little tree?” I asked.

“No,” the young man answered. “When I was clearing the ground, I found a bent little tree under a stone. So, I straightened it out, dug around it, watered it, and look at it now. It is shooting up to the sky.”

His wife turned to us. “Come, I’ll show you our kitchen first. It’s a small room, but that’s because it’s only for two. You cannot imagine the joy of having half a kitchen to myself.”

We went in to take a look, but only one of us could fit at a time. Four empty walls, a couple of shelves, a dirt floor, and a few boxes. On two of the boxes there were little kerosene cookers. Suddenly, the young housewife laughed. I looked at her. She understood my astonishment and said to me:

“You see, I just remembered how my mother used to show off her kitchen floor, in Iasi [Rumania]. The floor was waxed. When neighbors used to come visit my mother, she would show off her kitchen. After they left, the servant would have to re-polish the floor again, because the neighbors had left heel marks. If Momma could see my kitchen now, she would probably burst into tears.”

Next she led us into her living area. It was one room, practically without windows, but the wall was decorated with a rug. There was also small piece of rug on the floor next to the bed. The floor was bare earth, but clean. A large wedding photograph hung on the wall.

“This is our Garden of Eden,” the young woman kept saying. “If I want to, I can play with my baby on the floor. If I want to, I can lie down to sleep. A room for me, my husband, and my child. No one else pokes their nose in here unless I let them in. It’s mine! After the camps, this is a paradise!”

The old resident turned to the group. “People, take photos of the wreckage. Five years from now, there will be beautiful houses here, and trees will be planted around the houses. Children

p. 45

...will be running around playing. There will be big gardens with flowers next to every house. You will do it faster than we did in Ra'anana. We did not have a Jewish government. We did not have land. We had to pay for every square meter of earth. You are in a better situation than we were. There's a Jewish government. You have someone to take care of you. And there is earth, provided you work it. After the victory, there's enough land.

The old woman broke in:

"Great caretakers! Meanwhile, we haven't had water for three full days. We have to schlepp water with cans. And when they bring water with a truck, they measure it out to us as if it was wine."

"It's ok, don't worry," said the resident. There will be water. We are working on a new well. Soon, a week from now, there will be enough for you to shower three times a day."

"If you're such a water wizard," said the old woman, "see to it that there's enough water to wash the baby's diapers."

The young woman sighed. "She's partly right."

The young man waved his hand and turned to us:

"Only partly right? My wife is so happy that she is done with the camps and has a little corner to herself, that it seems she can be happy with nothing. I only have two days of work a week. In the meantime, we have not been given any land and, besides, I've never been a peasant in my life. It's three kilometers from here into the city. It's a sandy road. It's hard to get there to go shopping. We have to bury the baby's milk bottle in the ground to keep it cool. There's nothing to do here except eat and sleep. We live like cattle. The houses we've been given are precarious. What will happen when the rains come?"

"It's not a life for Jews," pitched in the old woman. "The young she-goat has her husband and baby, so she is content."

The young woman was defiant:

"Totally better than in the camps, where we had to take charity. And if I want to cry about everything we've gone through, I can cry by myself inside my palace, and no one has to see or hear it."

p. 46

She grabbed the child and went inside. The old woman sighed:

"Bless her heart, she is the only one still singing. But she has always been a Zionist."

We turned back towards Ra'anana. My resident delivered his argument, but now in Hebrew.

“Now you see the other side of the coin. Still not as nice as you might like, but not so terrible after all. They are on their way to becoming residents. We have taken a country, and we have to settle it. If not, the enemy will return. We have to create a new people, and build up a desolate land. We did not want to take the land by force, but you cannot always get what you want. We, the inhabitants, shed our blood to get this land. They, the immigrants, are shedding tears to settle it. As it is written: *In blood and fire Judah fell, and in blood and fire will it be established*. To that you can add, *and with tears, too*.

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1. The author explicitly prefers the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew, and Yiddish also shares this word for the Sabbath. Neither of the two usual English ways of spelling it, *Shabbat* or *Shabbos*, sounds like the Yiddish. The standard Yivo transliteration, *Shabes*, might be read by English readers as having one syllable. So, I use the spelling *Shabbes* throughout, though neither standard convention nor academic usage agrees.

2. About a dollar eighty [Author’s clarification].

3. [translator’s note]. A dunam is about a quarter of an acre.

## Chapter 5: An Excursion to the Negev

When I was in Israel, there were no trains running. The only transportation was by bus. A few cooperatives had a monopoly over the country's traffic. The buses did not run very often. They were by no means new, either. The roads were narrow and bad. Naturally, the arrival and departure times were approximate. A New Yorker, accustomed to the subway, to punctual trains, and to large, comfortable buses that come and go to the minute would have to be made of steel not to lose patience waiting for those buses. And when they finally did arrive, there was often nowhere to sit and you would have to stand the whole way.

But you have to remember that the State of Israel is just one year old, and no cars are being manufactured in the country. You need dollars to buy a new car, and there are higher priority things to buy with dollars. You should understand, too, that the railways were ruined, and that the population has increased by more than a third in one year.

The Jews in Israel are mature enough to understand all this. Besides, the securing of the country is still new and fresh. People are constantly saying:

"You see this bit of road we are traveling on? A year ago,...

p. 48

no one could pass through. There were Arab villages on both sides. Now we can travel freely, and even blow the horn to our heart's content."

"Do you see those ruins? Those were the scoundrels' homes. Who could have dared to show themselves here?"

And so, no one complains about the tight space, about the long lines, about the waiting or the rattling of the old jalopies.

But for a tourist with only three months to see the country, transportation is a big problem. Renting a car or hiring a taxi is not for the average tourist's pocketbook. There's a story they tell here about the cost of renting a car. There are a lot of variants, but this is the most common version:

A tourist goes into a rental company and says, "I want to rent a car for three days."

"*Bevakasha*, be my guest," says the owner, "we have these three cars here, take your pick."

"I will drive myself, and take care of the gas myself, of course."

"Good. It will cost you thus and such."

The tourist answers, "You don't understand. I don't want to buy your car, just rent it."



The joke does not exaggerate the high cost of renting or taking a taxi at all.

Well, before I set off to see the country, I wanted to see the Negev. Heading off to the Negev alone would have been extraordinarily difficult and would have taken too much time. Hiring a taxi was not in my budget. I decided to travel on an organized tour with my family for one day.

I was not enthusiastic. They only take you where they think it's interesting. You can't stop just anywhere. You can't look around where you're not supposed to. But under the circumstances, it was better...

p. 49

than nothing. Even a pre-packaged tour cost me more than seventy dollars for four people for one day, not including food.

The tour was arranged by the Histadrut<sup>1</sup>. We went into the office to pay. The employee asked me if I was a member of the Natsionaler Arbeter Farband [The Jewish National Workers Alliance].

I asked, "*What does the jubilee year have to do with Mount Sinai?* What does one have to do with the other?"

"If you are a member of the Farband, then you are actually a member of Histadrut, and so we charge you ten percent less."

That was a surprise and a bit of welcome good news to me. I saved over five dollars.

We were told to come at six o'clock, so I hired a taxi to drive from Ra'anana to Tel-Aviv, a distance of seventeen miles. It cost me twelve dollars. But the *tiul* [excursion] only started at eight o'clock, and we could have easily come with the bus. And even so, someone was late and had to chase us for twenty miles from Tel-Aviv with a taxi.

We rode in two buses, one for Hebrew-speakers and one for those who did not know Hebrew. I sat in the bus for the "ignoramuses".

As soon as we left Tel-Aviv and our guide began to point out the important and historical places of the Yishuv<sup>2</sup>, we ran into trouble. He spoke to us in English. Bad English, and with a British accent to boot. The crowd could barely understand him, and we started pleading with him to speak Yiddish. He told us that he did not know Yiddish. It would have to be either English or Hebrew. When we stopped for a while, we complained to the leader. He told him to speak Yiddish. So he spoke Yiddish. His Yiddish was no worse than his English. And once he forgot that "he did not know Yiddish" he spoke rather well. When he got stuck on a word, he used an English word (not always the right one) or a Hebrew word (always the right one), and the crowd helped him out. We were much happier.

For two hours, our path took us through old settlements and...

p. 50

we heard the same incantation every time: “This was an Arab settlement. Before the war, it was dangerous to go here. In such and such a year, they murdered so and so many people. During the war, our boys fell here by the dozens.” We came to a fork in the road. Both buses stopped and everyone went out into the open field. The lead guide blew his whistle. It grew quiet and he began to talk, in Yiddish, naturally, so that everyone would understand:

“Look at the road. Our fighters are buried like field mice here. This road needed to be held to stop the Egyptians from getting through. Our boys did not have any anti-tank guns, no machine guns, just hand-grenades and Molotov Cocktails. The Egyptians did not break through.

“And see and behold (his words) – this road is even more famous from long, long ago. This road led past two cities: Aphrah and Shaphir. In Micah, chapter one, verses ten through fifteen, it is written:

*“And Gath shall not tell you, ‘Refrain from weeping’. In the houses of Aphrah, strew dust around. Go away (into exile), inhabitants of Shaphir!”*

“In Hezekiah’s time, Sennacherib arrived by this road. He went to Jerusalem. Nearby there were Philistine cities, Gath and Ashkelon. You can feel how it is cool here, even in the heat of day, because there is always a breeze. It blows from the inland sea. Do you remember how Isaiah describes the swift movement of the Assyrian army?”

A man in his late sixties stood next to me. His head, beard, and moustache were clean-shaven. Nor did he have any eyebrows or eyelashes. His eyes were big and bulging. He spoke to his wife in a garbled mixture of Yiddish and English. “What is he hocking a tshaynik for? Who is interested in the Bible? They are just foolish stories. Show me life in Palestine now. What does he think, we are in Bible class?”

I went off to a side, away from the crowd, and studied the field. Flat, level ground as far as the eye could see. Not a tree,...

p. 51

not a bush, not a hill. Here and there was a freshly filled-in hole with a pipe left sticking up like a pole with wires above, swaying in the wind. I closed my eyes for a moment. I saw: Jewish boys lying in holes, waiting for the armies that would sweep in from the horizon. Suddenly I heard horses hooves and the clattering of chariots. I heard a call: The archers of Sennacherib are here. And above the noise I hear a clear voice:

*He came to Aiath  
He went through Migron  
He left his baggage in Michmas  
They were through the mountain pass  
In Geva they spent the night*

*Ramah trembled...*

*He waves his hand towards Mount Zion*

*Towards the high place—Jerusalem.*

[Isaiah 10:28-29; 10:32.]

Who said that? Had I heard an old voice, the echo of which remained in the clear air of this abandoned field? Or was it the guide quoting Isaiah so beautifully and clearly?

The leader blew insistently on his whistle. Apparently I had crept too far into the field and it was time to get back in the bus. The man with the bare head was next to me again, talking to his wife:

“Why is he bossing us? Pest! Maybe we’ll come to a kibbutz soon and get a cold drink of water? I’m hungry. Did you bring some good sandwiches from the hotel?”

We rode on. The Negev began to spread out before us. Workers were working for miles and miles along the side of the road, laying water pipes. I don’t know where the water was being drawn from or where it was being brought, but it was a large undertaking.

The Negev looks very different than I had imagined. I thought that the Negev would be a barren desert: sand and sky. But as far as Beer Sheva (we were not taken any further)...

p. 52

the Negev is bedecked with tall grasses. The grasses are dried out from the sun, but still, it isn’t just sand and dunes. Here and there the grass was even a bit green and, not infrequently, a tree with green branches stood in the middle of the burned grass. The guide told us:

“This green tree is called “Eyshel,” as it is written in the Chumesh: *And Abraham planted a tamarisk (an eyshel) in Beer Sheva*. There it stands to this day, and I will bring you to it. But meanwhile, look how strangely the tree grows. Not especially tall, but very thick with branches. And remember, wherever there is an eyshel, there’s water there.”

A Jew from Brooklyn, one of our own, was sitting next to me. He turned to me. “It’s very strange. We are traveling on the pages of the Prophets and the Five Books of Moses.”

He asked me for a cigarette. Apparently, that was his first good look at me. He recognized me and said, “What do you know! You are in the bus with us, and I didn’t even realize it. It’s good I met you here. Maybe you can explain some things about this country to me?”

I answered, “This is just my second week here. What could I know better than you do?”

“This doesn’t have to do with time. You understand things better than I do. I’ve been in the country for three weeks. As you can see, I’ve been riding around the country, going on tours like this one wherever they’ll take me. I’ll tell you the truth. The country is wonderful. Small, but beautiful. Our Jews are going to make something of it. But it’s strange to me that they keep telling us there is nowhere for people to settle. It’s a lie. Wherever I go, I see barren hills and

empty fields. The country is empty! Our Jews, who have developed The Bronx, Brownsville, Boro-Park, East Flatbush, Flatbush and Queens will get a hold of Israel. The country will be developed and populated.”

“So, that’s good. So what’s eating you?”

p. 53

“Yes, it’s good. The first few days I thought I would spend three months here. I’ve been here only three weeks and I am going back.”

“Why?”

“I’m ashamed to tell you. I, a Zionist, feel like a stranger here. I am still not such an old man. I like to go to meetings, to all kinds of gatherings, to the theater, to concerts. I am without language here. On the street, in the bus, at the hotel, even at the post office, people will talk to you in Yiddish. But at any kind of assembly or performance – everything is Hebrew. And I don’t understand a word. I don’t even have a Yiddish newspaper here. Yes, they print an English paper, but my English is not that accomplished. I want a Yiddish newspaper.”

“What’s this, you’re a Yiddishist now?”

“Heaven forbid. Never have been. But to be in Yidn-Land and to see newspapers in every language on the newsstands: English, German, Polish, Romanian, and none in Yiddish... it’s unpleasant to me. Please don’t get me wrong: I am not saying they should get rid of Hebrew. Only allow Yiddish. Even their Hebrew is peculiar to me. I can read a Torah portion, even a little bit of Rashi. But that has nothing to do with the language that they speak. ‘Avrom’ has now become ‘Avraham’ and ‘Sore’, ‘Sarah’. It’s like some kind of Arabic.”

“So, this is already old news,” I answered.

“I’m sure you’ve been in on the joke,” the man smiled, “but I just got it. I heard and I knew they speak Hebrew here, but I am here in the country for the first time. So, tell me, with so many Jews who still speak Yiddish here, why aren’t they provided with a newspaper and something to entertain them?”

I did not want to get drawn into a debate with him. I answered, “I’ve been here just two weeks, and cannot give an opinion yet. Besides, I am a Yiddishist, and am useless as a witness.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Perhaps.”

The bus stopped. The guide called out:

p. 54

“We’re in Negba! We will stay here for half an hour!”

Negba. How much has been written about Kibbutz Negba! Right opposite this kibbutz was a fort. From that fort you could see the kibbutz as though it were laid out on a plate. The Egyptians shot at the kibbutz day and night. Nevertheless, Negba did not capitulate. The kibbutzniks halted the Egyptian army. The road to Tel-Aviv remained closed.

The bravery and heroics of Negba have been described by journalists and writers, and sung by poets. Negba became a symbol of the recent war. Of course, our tour would include a visit to Negba.

All of the participants stood around the guide. He began to talk:

“Our *nehag* (driver) often brought ammunition and food here. I thought that he would tell you about the deeds of the heroes of Negba. But I see Mottel is walking over here. He is the kibbutz baker. He was the *m’fakeyd*, the commander. Perhaps he can tell us what was done here.”

The guide called out. “Mottel, come on over. Maybe you can tell my Americans about Negba. But you’ll have to speak Yiddish. More than half of them don’t understand Hebrew.”

“Nu, Yiddish is Yiddish. I still have not forgotten my Bessarabian Yiddish,” answered Mottel. He stationed himself on a little mound of sand next to a dug-out trench, and he talked.

I went off to see the community. I’d read my fill about the heroism of Negba. I preferred to use my half hour to meet the people and talk with them.

The water tower was still standing, but was completely shot up with holes like a sieve. There were holes that you could put your whole head into. Below, the tower was encircled by yellow tarps. I went in to the tent.

A kind of earthen wall had been built around the water tower,...

p. 55

about waist high. The sand was supported by a wooden fence. A strapping young man stood there, working. He was working on a mural—a diagram of how the kibbutz had looked before the war. He did the work with primitive tools: A razor, a pocket-knife, a spoon to dig up the sand, and a bucket of paint. The figures of stables, houses, cows, and fields, lay packed in a crate that one might use to pack citrus fruits. He measured, calculated, and placed one “building” after another onto the wall of the earthwork.

We had a conversation.

Yes, he was “...here the whole time of the siege. Amazing to hold out? You had to hold out, if not, we were ready to fall here and be cut to pieces by the savages. It was no game. It was not a

sure thing that we would hold out. It was lucky the first cease-fire came. That saved us. The second cease-fire saved the Arabs.

“What was left of the kibbutz? That, you can see in a different tent. I’m showing how the kibbutz looked before the war. There are two more displays in two other tents: How the kibbutz looked after the destruction, and how it will look after we have rebuilt it. Only the water tower will remain as a monument to future generations.

“We are over our heads with work to be done. Sure, it would be good if we could take in three hundred immigrants. But they won’t come. They don’t want to settle in a kibbutz, let alone in a kibbutz so far from a city. We don’t have it so good. We have to hire day laborers. That won’t do.

“No, the children still have not come back. There’s still nowhere to put them. But the buildings will be ready in a couple of months. We have gotten a loan.

“Why a loan? You can see how the kibbutz is practically completely destroyed. Rebuilding will take a pile of money. We’ve had enough important guests here; even your [Henry] Morgenthau and [Daniel] Frisch have been here. All of them saw the destruction, were amazed at our heroism, and promised us the world. Have you seen anything? We haven’t. So, we got a loan.”

p. 56

“Tell me, young man,” I asked. “You’re working like a demon, you have to take on extra workers for hire, and here you are preparing an exhibition that is swallowing up a lot of time and effort. You’ve invited people from all over the country to an event [for the display] in a few days. It must cost money. How does that make sense?”

“What do you think we are, robots?” he asked. “All we do is drive ourselves and work? A little culture is also a necessity.”

The guide whistled. I left the tent. We went on our way.

We arrived in Be’er Sheva. A lovely city. There was very little destruction. The big mosque was untouched. Next to the mosque was a fine big restaurant, filled with military people.

As soon as we had finished eating, our guide began showing us the city. First he led us to Abraham’s well, which Abraham dug, and the servants of Abimelech took from him by force. A roof, or a kind of tent made out of heavy stones, had been built over the well. On top of the roof there is a hole from which you can see the water in the well. Right above the opening is a wheel with a long chain to which metal buckets are attached. That is how water is drawn there.

Off went the tourists, clambering up onto the roof and from there still higher onto the nearby stone arch. The women shrieked, the children yelled and the men took photographs.

I stood leaning against the wall of a half-collapsed house, a bit away from the well, looked at the scampering tourists, and could not for the life of me relate them to our patriarch Abraham. However much I struggled to do it, I could not imagine that these men and women who look like all other Americans are the great-great-great-great-grandchildren of Avrom Avinu, who dug this well in Be'er Sheva.

The guide whistled. He brought everyone to see the most beautiful building in Be'er Sheva. The Jewish Army had taken it over. It had been a courthouse and, before that, a pension [boarding house] for the daughters of well-off Arabs. Now the house is the soldiers' recreation club. It was something to see.

p. 57

I stayed, alone. I looked and looked at the well. A mist rose from the water. The quiet was almost disorienting. The light of the sun was so bright that you could feel it. At my right there was a sign: "Travel in the Negev beyond this point is forbidden."

I stood and looked at the well, at the mist and at the sunlight. Suddenly, I heard voices. Long-forgotten voices. My schoolteacher Sholem "Crooked Hand" was teaching me Chumesh:

*Vayehi boeys hahie*<sup>3</sup> and it was in that time, *vayomer Abimelekh uFikhol sar tsevoy el Avrom lemor* Abimelech and Phicol, his field marshal, spoke to Abraham saying: '*Eloyhim imkho bekhlo asher ato ose.*' God is with you in all that you do.' [Genesis 21:22]

Now the stone canopy over the well disappeared. Only a ring of rectangular stones remained. Abraham and Abimelech and Phicol arrived. Abimelech tall and thin, a dark-skinned Arab sheikh. Next to him, Phicol the field marshal, short and stout, with bright eyes. There were servants, and seven bound sheep, not far from Abraham's tamarisk.

*How did they come together?* I thought. *The tamarisk would have to have been planted later.*

But now here was Abraham, alone, and I asked him:

"Father Abraham, did you not long for Babylon, for your father and for Ur-Kashdim? Your brothers and sisters were still there. You had planted trees there, too. Here, you had to fight with Abimelech and do battle with kings. You had seen God there too, hadn't you?! Father Abraham, how could home be there and here?"

Abraham did not answer. Another voice woke me from my reverie.

"Shalom! What are you doing standing there by yourself? They're all gathering and are ready to leave."

I looked at him. A Mem-Tsadik (*mishtara tsvayot*— a military policeman) stood next to me, smiling.

“You really speak Yiddish?” I answered.

“I am not that good at Hebrew. I’ve only been in the country for two years.”

p. 58

“How did you become a policeman?”

“The army doesn’t ask.”

“What are you guarding?”

“Didn’t you see? *Travel in the Negev is forbidden beyond this point.*”

I felt lightheaded, apparently from the heat. We went into the shade together. He brought me a cold drink of water. Then we talked. An old story. Out of his whole family, only he remained.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head on the wall and listened. Soon another voice joined in. Father Abraham gave his delayed answer: If the Abimelechs had remained here, where could he have gone? It’s easy to pose questions. Sometimes, one has to find a way to answer.

The young man led me to the bus. They had been waiting for me. Five minutes later, we were headed back to Tel-Aviv.

On the way back we stopped at some kibbutzim. We visited Yad Mordechai, which had been taken by the Egyptians. We saw the mass grave of the fallen. Our tourists took pictures of themselves next to the grave. After a while everyone went down to the valley where there was a new dining hall. They were in the process of eating, and our tourists, nearly seventy people, went in with a commotion. A kibbutznik lost his patience and asked:

“In America do people let themselves into someone’s house in the middle of a meal?”

Not everyone exited promptly.

An hour later we stopped in another kibbutz, a younger one: Nir Am. There were dozens of boys and girls. The boys in yarmulkes. The girls dressed like in all kibbutzim.

The group of young people served us tea. It was hard for me to fathom why they served hot tea to seventy strangers so enthusiastically. They apologized for not having any food to go with it.

I didn’t have the heart to accept the tea they served. I...

p. 59

sat in a corner and talked to a young man. He told me about the war and about how they’d come there to occupy the empty land. Yes, besides working they have a Mishnah study group and a



Gemara group. The girls study, too, and they pray three times a day. At prayer, the girls sit on the left side and the boys' benches are on the right. Matches are arranged. They hope to have a mixed economy. Meanwhile, it's hard. The hardest thing is being so far from another settlement. They are happy to get to see other people.

We stopped in other kibbutzim, too. But I will write more about kibbutzim later.

We drove back to Tel-Aviv. The crowd was tired. But there was not time to sit still. We drove past a city. A military police officer stopped us. "This is the Arab ghetto." No, it was not fenced off, but he had to open a gate to let us in. The street was teeming with Arabs: women, men, old people and children. They did not look at us. Several young men sat on the sidewalk and smoked, looking defiant.

Our tourists were a little confused. A few spoke quietly. "Yuck. This is not right." Others answered, "Well, the war just ended. What do you expect people to do? You can't just leave them free as birds. Anyway, it's not fenced off, only guarded by soldiers." But still others called out happily, "Thank God we survived! And that it's not them fencing us in, but us holding them."

We came to the exit, which was blocked off. A soldier let us through and waved us on. The bus rode through slowly. Some of the Jews called out, "Guard them well! Watch them!"

We arrived in Tel-Aviv at half past nine at night. We'd missed the last bus to Ra'anana. I went to look for a taxi. The city was lit up, busy, and noisy. Children had some kind of activity in the nearest park. Apparently they were "Young Workers", because I saw a *madrikh*, a leader, who directed them in singing and dancing. They sang the closing song, *Moledet* [Homeland]:

*Motherland, motherland. We will build you.  
Motherland, it's our land  
we are building you, motherland,  
this is the commandment of our blood,  
the commandment of generations.  
An end to cursed servitude!  
The bright blaze of a hopeful light  
Rises in our blood...<sup>4</sup>*

The children finished the song and scattered joyfully. The leader began to hurry off the ones who were still clustered there:

"Off you go, home!"

I found a taxi. My wife was upset with me.

"What took you so long?"

I was tired from the trip. Very tired. From everything I had seen and heard. Our family got into the taxi. I sat next to the driver and closed my eyes. As the car started moving, the driver hummed the melody of the song that the children had sung.

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1. The Histadrut was originally a labor organization, which grew into a business conglomerate and employer in its own right.

2. Lit. “the settlement”, the Yishuv is pre-Independence Jewish Palestine. After the war it was sometimes used to distinguish the Jewish community from the nation as a whole.

3. [translator’s note] Here, the reader will have to forgive me my mangling the Ashkenazi pronunciation of the Hebrew. Simon was clear that he preferred it, and if he is channeling his kheyder teacher’s voice, it would certainly be with that, rather than the modern Hebrew pronunciation.

4. It may be the song he is referring to is **נבנה ארצנו**, “Our Country Will be Built,” by Avraham Levinson.

## Chapter 6: Jerusalem

There are words in every language that are always loaded with emotion and imagery; words that never get worn out; words that do not become clichés. In Yiddish, “Jerusalem” is such a word.

All Jewish children who have immersed themselves in Torah, studied in a Yeshiva, or even just gone to kheyder know Jerusalem. There is a picture of the city in the imagination of every Jewish person. Naturally, this picture has been built out of scripture verses, passages of Talmud and snippets of folklore—a mix of reality and fantasy, of the distant past and the actual present.

We went to see Jerusalem. When we got to the central bus station in Tel-Aviv and I saw the sign reading ‘Jerusalem,’ my heart skipped a beat. When the bus pulled up with the word ‘Jerusalem’ in its little window, it still seemed to me as though it must just be an illustration in a storybook. Even as I sat down in the bus, I did not believe that my family and I were actually riding to Jerusalem:

*I am writing a children’s book, I thought, with a story about Jews who are riding to Jerusalem.*

The bus went on the road to Jerusalem. The countryside was desolate, overgrown with dried grasses and thorns. It matched how...

p.62

I pictured it in my mind: Jerusalem and wasteland. A bit of a sentence crept into my thoughts and I could not get rid of it:

“Every city stands on its spot, and Jerusalem is desolate.”

A soldier sat next to me. Before I could look around, he spoke to me as though to an old acquaintance, and like all the Jews in the country, he had not yet recovered from the great victory. Every five or ten minutes he would point with his finger:

“You see, this place here was impassable. The scoundrels were in charge here. But now , the driver can not only drive here, he can even blow the horn as much as he wants. He does not have to worry about waking up an Arab who is hiding somewhere, lying in wait with a loaded rifle.”

We were getting closer to Jerusalem. I already supposedly knew about the gruesome siege, and about the deadly peril that the drivers of the transports faced when they tore through the hail of bullets and fire the Arabs let loose on them from the mountains. Still the images I saw made me very uneasy, along with the soldier’s conversation:

“You see all these overturned lorries (trucks)? Every vehicle was driven by someone who knew how dangerous the road to Jerusalem was. But ammunition and food had to be brought to the besieged. The destroyed trucks lie here like witnesses to what the Arabs did to us.

“The trucks were blown to pieces by machine guns and often by mines. The devils were in fortifications on the hills on both sides of the road. It was a real piece of work to tear them out of there. You can see, there is a dead truck practically every two-hundred meters. People wanted to clear them out and make the road look nice. But then they thought better of it. Let them lie. The dead vehicles should stay as a memorial. People should see how hemmed in we were by the enemy. Then they will understand the bravery of the Yishuv.”

We turned off the main road. A piece of the road was still held by the Arabs, so the bus used the...

p. 63

newly-built highway. The road had been built hastily, and there were holes here and there, where the asphalt had washed out. Groups of workers stood there, working. On both sides of this new road, “The Burma Road”, the landscape was even more barren and desolate. There was no grass and no trees. Involuntarily, a verse came to my tongue:

*The roads from Zion are sad without those who come for the festivals. All her gates are deserted.* [Lamentations 1:4]

Now we were back up on the old road. The hills kept coming higher and higher, until they surrounded us. The mountains pushed up through the landscape all the way up to the sky. Barren, dry rock. Here and there was a bush or a small tree and, even less often, a patch of grass. That made the barrenness even more dramatic.

It might have just seemed that way, but I saw signs of terraces on the lower parts of the hills. In the time before the destruction of the Second Temple, the foothills were fertile. Every mountain had terraces, and people sowed and planted on them. But, over the course of hundreds of years, the rains washed off the fertile soil and the terraces, and only rocky mountain slopes remained. Yet grass sprouts here and there among the cracks in the rocks, a dwarf tree grows and a bush clings to the stony ground with its long, narrow roots.

A kind of distress and anger took hold of me. The earth does look fertile. The earth near the foothills is dark red, like all fertile places. (This is why earth is ‘adamah’ in Hebrew. ‘Adam’ means red). When the earth is sown and watered, the fields are green with full and broad-leaved vegetables. Where Jews have planted forests, the trees are fresh and shady. But so little has been planted, sowed and watered. The whole region looks dried out and sunburnt, barren and empty.

We came to the Arab villages that were taken by the Jews. The walls of the buildings that stood next to the road were smeared with the signatures of soldiers from the division that took the village, or guarded it. The soldier sitting next to me kept...

p. 64

telling the story of every battle and every village, whether destroyed or still standing.

The bus went up and up the mountains. It started banging and wheezing so loudly that the soldier could no longer talk. It grew cooler and cooler. We had to put on jackets. The bus crawled out from a twisty road and rattled up onto a flat bit of land. In the distance, I saw Jerusalem, laid out like a picture on a painted postcard.

A modern man riding on a bus cannot fall to the ground and lose himself in ecstasy when he comes to the gates of Jerusalem. So I sat, as if peacefully, and was silent. I watched the city unfold before me and did not know what to do with myself.

We rode into New Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>. On the surface it was a city like all cities in Israel. But I felt as though there was something different. Even in the central bus terminal, I already saw different-looking Jews than in Tel-Aviv. Jews with beards, peyes, and long kapotes [frock coats]. More Yiddish was spoken than Hebrew. Something about the city looked more Jewish to me than Tel-Aviv. Why? I don't know. Maybe it just seemed that way to me because I knew I was in Jerusalem. Still, I felt it at every turn. The restaurant food was more Jewish than in other places in Israel. The restaurateur did not look like other Jews of his age, as though he might as easily live in New York and speak English, or in France and speak French, but he was a kind of continuation of Vilna, Warsaw and Minsk. A Jew who bore not only the yoke of Yiddishkayt, but also the cleverness, experiences and pride of many generations of Torah.

We stayed in a truly fine hotel. The prices were set by the government. A large poster on the wall tallied every little detail that a hotel can charge, with the price next to each item on the list. The hotel was sumptuous, but at the registration desk there stood a man who spoke a poor English, good Yiddish, and a Hebrew with an accent from our loshn-koydesh<sup>2</sup>. The man carried something of the specific flavor of a Jewish wayside inn.

p. 65

It was Friday, still before noon, and we set off for the "Mea Shearim" quarter. It's not a big neighborhood, but its streets are twisted and tangled, with probably a hundred entrances and exits. We walked there as a group of four: My wife, my daughter, a relative of ours, and I. Two French Jews joined us a little later and went along with us.

The streets of New Jerusalem are broad, and nice and clean. Suddenly, we happened into an Eastern quarter with narrow streets; courtyards within courtyards, houses on top of houses with balconies in the air, steps and doorways. And there was commotion, chaos and stench, and a tangle of men, women, children and donkeys.

Women carried tins of baked goods and pots of cooked food. Men ran to the baths with laundry under their arms. There were tiny stores, two cubits long by one cubit wide with half-empty shelves. Cries carried from the houses:

"Motl, where are you? Yankl, why aren't you going with Tateh to the public bath?"

Here was a store with challahs and other baked goods, in a cloud of flies. A young woman with a kerchief drawn down to her eyes stood weighing a challah in her hand. She laid it down and

picked up another. She tapped and weighed every challah in the bin like that until she picked the first one back up again.

A Jew wandered by from somewhere. He held a cloth full of fruit in one hand and a large braided challah for Shabbes in the other. Under his armpit, a bottle of wine.

We came to a greengrocer. There were flies and all kinds of gnats. The fruits and vegetables were fairly rotten and lay uncovered in big piles on the ground, on carts and on boards.

A young couple, apparently Yemeni, came in and had them weigh a kilo of grapes, two kilos of tomatoes and some vegetables—not picking them out, not even rejecting any of the cucumbers that broke in their hands. Put it all in a bag and were done. The bag quickly got wet and turned all kinds of colors.

My lady grew incensed:

p. 66

“Here’s your Yiddishkayt for you! Unembellished, unadorned, and undiluted. Pure Yiddishkayt! A piece of the shtetl, taken straight out of the writings of Mendele and S. Ben Zion!<sup>3</sup> Be proud!”

Meanwhile, the French Jew noticed a dignified-looking old man, sitting in a cellar and working on something. When he pointed his camera at the cellar, the Jew screamed:

“Go away, heretic! Apostates, who lead others astray! I’m going to throw something at your head!” The Frenchman paid no attention and kept turning the handle on his camera.

We went on. We landed in a market again. All kinds of merchandise was displayed on dozens of carts: Chocolates, candy, broken Chanukah menorahs, and plain rags. There were open stalls, littered with anything you can think of: candles, pieces of chintz, bottles, lamps. Next to them were barrels of herring. Sweating men with long beards and still longer peyes, tales-kotn<sup>4</sup> over their undershirts, women with aprons over their dresses and wigs on their shaved heads—all of them calling loudly about their wares.

A pair of twin boys ran by. Two seven-year-olds, with bright faces, silky black hair, long peyes and tales-kotns over their shirts. A living illustration of Bialek’s “Little Moyshes and Little Shloymes.” The two boys enchanted me, and I wanted to photograph them. I asked them to stand next to the wall where the sun was shining, to get a better picture of them.

A man appeared from nowhere, straightened their shirts, smoothed their tales-kotns, licked two fingers and curled their peyes, and fixed their yarmulkes. He told them to hold hands.

When I had taken their picture, a man selling cucumbers at a stall nearby said, “Now buy them chocolate. They earned it.”

I went to his stall. He waved his hand. "Not from me. I sell cheap cucumbers. From him." He pointed to another stall. "He has foreign chocolates, wrapped in paper."

p. 67

I took out twenty piasters and gave them to the Jew at the chocolate stall. He kept only ten. "They could get sick from too much chocolate," he said.

Meanwhile a beggar appeared with a face that I have only seen in the images of the great painters. The beggar was dressed in the kind of rags you would see on a stage, when actors portray themselves as beggars. I pointed my camera at him. He put out his hand:

"Pay first."

I gave him a coin. He took it, then slyly pocketed it and said, "That is only for you. He," and he pointed to the Frenchman with his camera, "he will have to pay separately.

"What? Ten piasters is too little for you?" asked the man from the candy stall.

"Don't you butt in," answered the beggar, angrily.

My lady again would not let it go. She became practically hysterical.

"To you, this is Yiddishkayt. To you, mold is beauty. I tell you that it is plain, dark mud and ordinary mold. The whole crowd reeks with a bad smell. Thank God we are rid of the beards, peyes, tales-kotns, wigs, and the whole stench."

We left the quarter and stood at the corner of a broad, clean street. I paused on our way out. My wife pleaded with tears in her eyes: "That wasn't enough for you? You didn't have your fill?"

I answered, calmly. "Something is missing here."

"You're missing something here? It seems like all of Kasrilevke and Tuniadevke are here. What more do you want?" My lady was angry.

"All over the world," I answered, "in neighborhoods like this there are drunks and painted young women, who..."

p. 68

wink at men and call to them, even when they are accompanied by their wives. I'm looking, and I don't see that here."

My wife was silent. I saw that she was looking at something. I turned my gaze and saw a large store on the other side of the street – a bookstore.

I smiled. Across the street and into the store we went. Half the shop was packed with new books, both religious and secular, the other half with old books.

A young man with a long beard and peyes, dressed neatly in a long, shiny frock coat, asked how he could help us. I asked him:

“Might you have the *Letter to Yemen*, by Maimonides?”

He looked hard at me, as if to say: “Get a load of this strange bird from America!” and answered:

“Yes I have it, I have the official edition.”

He handed me the thin volume. In fact, the name of the bookstore along with its address in Mea Shearim were on the cover.

While I looked it over, the bookseller brought out another book, saying, “As long as you are interested in such matters, have a look at another lovely book, Musar Hamikra V'Hatalmud<sup>5</sup>, published by Mosad [HaRav] Kook. You will enjoy it.

Before I could really look around, there was a fair pile of books next to me. He gave me the bill. Experienced from Tel-Aviv, I knew that you can get twenty percent off the price. I asked him,

“...and the twenty percent discount?”

“Already figured in. Take it, look, here are the prices, the total, and the twenty percent discount.”

I had a look. It added up correctly. I asked him,

“Please tell me, sir, what’s the sense in setting a price that then only has to be discounted?”

“It’s a custom,” he said. “That’s how it’s done here.”

p. 69

We left the bookstore. I teased my wife:

“At the entrance to Mea Shearim there is a bookstore, with all kinds of religious books and treatises on ethics. All over the world, at the entrances to poor and exotic neighborhoods there are large pubs, where the denizens buy strong liquor and other exotic pleasures.”

“All your holy books and spiritual beauty don’t cancel out the flies, the dirt, the rotten vegetables and the stench,” she said, pressing her lips. “The whole quarter should be torn out, or blown up.”

“I agree,” I answered, “but first they should take out the Jews, and then blow up the quarter. Then, after blowing up the buildings, they should put up beautiful modern houses with plumbing and give every family two or three well-lit, sanitary rooms, with all the modern appliances. But I



implore you, leave their beards, peyes and talis-kotns. That's not the source of the filth. The crowding and poverty are responsible, not their piety."

We got back to the hotel. The day was still young, and they dragged me out to look at a lot of government institutions. When we got back it was dark. Across from the hotel was a Mizrachi<sup>6</sup> teacher's seminary. The song *Lekho doydi* carried from the open windows. Neither the Sephardic pronunciation nor the strange intonations of the melody could obscure the familiar ritual of the Friday night service.

The next day, Shabbes, my wife and daughter went to Beit HaKerem to look at the seminary and then at the place where Herzl's tomb had been carved out. I stayed at the hotel. In the afternoon, I set out to look at the city.

It was a pleasure to stroll the streets of Jerusalem. This was the first time I put on a jacket and tie in Israel. Even in the middle of Tamuz, it's cool in Jerusalem.

The streets were full. Groups of people stood, talking. People were talking about everything under the sun, but mostly about work, or the price of food, or gossip about neighbors and people in the community.

p. 70

All kinds of posters and announcements were attached to the fences. The posters from "The Union" and "Mizrachi" about desecrating the Sabbath were the most striking.

The stores were closed. No buses were running, but a lot of restaurants and cafés were open. The offices of the taxi companies were also open. That Shabbes they did a lot of business in these offices. A lot of people came to order taxis for the next day, which was Israeli Independence Day. Everyone wanted to ride to the parade that was going to be held in Tel-Aviv.

People strolled. Taxis and private automobiles passed by often. A great many Jews were smoking in public. In the cafés, people ate, drank, smoked, and paid in cash. None of the observant Jews passing by got angry at the violation of the Sabbath, and there were a lot of observant Jews, young and old, on the streets. I walked and looked at everything. I stopped people and asked them about the ruined buildings. Everyone was happy to talk to me and tell me what they knew.

I walked by a military police station. A small sign warned: *Unauthorized Entry Forbidden*. I looked and saw the door was open, so I went in. I saw a door in front of me, so I opened it. I went this way from room to room and nobody stopped me. Only when I got to the fifth room did an officer look at me in astonishment and ask:

"What are you doing here? Who are you?"

"I am an American Jew," I answered, "and I wanted to see what a Jewish military police station looked like."

“No one stopped you?”

“No.”

“Oh well. Come, let me show you around and you can see what you may. There is really nothing to look at, just orders and records all written in Hebrew.

I asked him to show me a *p’kuda*, an order, just out of curiosity. He did.

p. 71

I left or, rather, he accompanied me out. The officer looked at the soldier who was stationed at the entry desk and said something to him quietly. The soldier's face changed. I hope he was not punished too badly.

I arrived at the border of the new city – the Jaffa Gate. A soldier with a rifle stood guard. I greeted him and he answered me. We talked. He willingly told me the short version of his life story. Only he and a sister were left from his whole family. Yes, he has been in the army for two years. His sister is on a Kibbutz. He concluded:

“I am standing guard here with a rifle on my shoulder. Twenty meters away, right behind a wall of this ruin here, an Arab is standing guard. It's to our credit that no one is shooting.”

“And what if they did start shooting?” I said, playing dumb. “They could poke right through the ruins and just like that they could take this part of the city with the military police station.”

“Have no fear,” he answered, his Bessarabian accent showing in the way he pronounced his vowels. “You can sleep peacefully. If only they would start. My God! In twenty-four hours, before the United Nations woke up, we would have taken the Old City of Jerusalem, along with Abdullah and his turban. *Hakl-bakl-mikl-flekl*<sup>7</sup>. Then, call us whatever you want. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

A man with a thirteen-year-old boy popped up next to me. He called out.

“On my word, he talks like an Etzelnik.”

“Nu? What of it?”

“Nothing. I like it just the way you said it. If we had only pretended to be deaf in one ear when they called the ceasefire, and taken Jerusalem.

Several more Jews gathered. The soldier spoke out:

“Jews, you may not stand around here. It couldn't be helped; someone came over here to take a look. I'm not a bully. But a whole crowd? Off with you.”

The man with the thirteen year old went to take his leave. I asked if I could walk with him for a bit.

p. 72

“Be my guest. Why not?”

The man wore a long fine beard and good-enough peyes, and dressed in shirtsleeves.

I asked him:

“It seems that you are an observant Jew, so how can you agree with the Etzelniks? In America we consider them to be terrorists, murderers.”

“What people say there is not even the whole of it. But, I’m telling you, for them every Jew is precious. To the Mapam, and even to the Mapai<sup>8</sup>, observant Jews are considered uncivilized, no better than the Arabs.”

I asked him to be specific. He laid out his thoughts on Jews and Israel:

“Yes, I am an old settler. Why do I speak Yiddish? A Jew speaks Yiddish and knows Hebrew. The boy goes to Yeshiva. Does he feel strange among friends who don’t wear peyes? Why should he feel strange? They also go in peyes, only in front. Why is it better to let the hair grow in front than on the sides?

“What does he learn in Yeshiva? Gemore [Gemara]. In his earlier school he went through the early prophets and the later prophets, and he learned to write and to do math up through fractions. Now he studies Gemore. No, he doesn’t translate it into Hebrew. One studies Gemore in Yiddish. To study Gemore in Hebrew is like studying Gemore without a melody.

“What will the boy be good for? I have heard this question asked several times, and I absolutely don’t understand it. I ask you, how is our curriculum different than the curriculum in the public schools? They also learn to read and write. They study the early and later prophets and math. But what else? They add history to it. What is history? The interpretation of sources. A boy who knows Tanakh, the Agudes of the Talmud and Midrash knows the sources. They can help themselves to the interpretations. Later history? I hope he will read other sources, including the Responsa.

“Geography? How much does the average person remember of his geography? He will be able to read a map. Big deal!

“Languages? How many Americans know a language other than English? What then? People learn to memorize and recite things? To strengthen...

p. 73

his mind so he can earn a living later? So, Torah sharpens the mind. Obviously, someone who wants to become a government official, or who wants to learn a profession has to study secular subjects. But for us ordinary Jews, the Torah is enough.

“Our children know Hebrew and Yiddish, writing and arithmetic, and actually, a fair bit of Torah. Then, too, they have faith, which fortifies them and strengthens them in times of trouble. A child of ours will become a tradesman or they will go to a kibbutz, or a cooperative and... remain an observant Jew.

“Of course, it is hard for you Jews in America to educate your children like our children. You live among goyim, and derive your livelihood from them. You must gradually become more like them, learn their language and know what they know. You go among them and do business with them. But here in Israel we are in a Jewish country, and we live among Jews. We can have our own path to Jewish education.”

It was getting late. The man went off to his afternoon prayers, and I went to the hotel. It was still light, but the signs on the cinemas were already lit up. A throng of children stood next to the theater where “Tarzan and the Apes” was showing, discussing the pictures on the posters, in a ringing Hebrew.

I went back outside. The melody from the afternoon service carried out from the synagogue at the religious teachers’ seminary.

I went into to a café to get something to eat. I remembered that I had not eaten all day. The food was delicious, the coffee good, and a string group was playing soft music. A group of young people came in. making a racket and a commotion. Stay here? No, it’s not lively enough. It’s like a regular old age home. They want jazz. Swing. Maybe they can find a band somewhere that plays a rhumba.

I went back to the hotel, thinking my wife and daughter should be back from their “excursion”. Yes, they’d returned. I went up...

p.74

to our room to rest up. The music of a malave malke<sup>9</sup> came from the open window of the teachers’ seminary. From the hotel you could see two movie theaters. Somewhere in the distance, fires twinkled in the Old City of Jerusalem. To the right you could see the beginning of Mea Shearim. Below, in the street at the foot of the hotel, someone was putting up a large poster, announcing an evening of lectures featuring the great minds of the University.

We left Jerusalem the next day.

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1. The Old City, including the Temple Mount, was under Jordanian control from the cease fire in 1949 until 1967.
2. Our Loshn-Koydesh. The holy tongue, or Biblical and Talmudic Hebrew. Here, the author uses the term to indicate an Ashkenazic Hebrew accent, from East-European traditional religious training.
3. Mendele, or Mendele Mokher Sforim, was the pen name of Sholem Yankev Abramovich. S. Ben Zion was the penname of Simchah Gutmann. They were *maskilim*, or Jewish enlightenment writers, critical of the 'backward' way of life of the Jews of Eastern Europe in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
4. *Peyes*, sidecurls. *Tales-kotn*, or tallit katan. A thin vest or undergarment with fringes.
5. By Shlomo Zalman Pines.
6. *Mizrachi*, relating to Jews from North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants.
7. The whole kit-and-caboodle.
8. The left-wing labor party and the center-left.
9. 'Escorting of the Sabbath Queen'. Music and dance following the ceremony that ends the Sabbath and begins a new week.

## Chapter 7: A Military Parade and a Memorial

I returned from Jerusalem, arriving in Tel-Aviv at two o'clock in the afternoon on the day of the military parade. I then went to take a bus to Ra'anana. The bus, which was always packed and would leave passengers behind because it couldn't take them all, was completely empty. Only one old woman sat on the back bench. The driver, who already knew me well, because I had often rode to Ra'anana with him, looked at me astonished.

"You're leaving from Tel Aviv now? People are coming from every corner of the country to watch our military parade and you're going back to Ra'anana two hours before the parade starts?"

I answered him curtly:

"I don't like military parades."

The bus left the station. The bus driver turned his steering wheel and talked to me:

"You are a strange American tourist. All your tourists run to see our greatness and strength and you come out with, 'I don't like military parades.' You are forgetting one thing, good sir: This is a Jewish military parade. Once our parades consisted of *binoreynu uviskeyneynu*, young and old, going out to welcome a Lord with bread and salt and a Torah scroll. The...

p.76

goy was in the know and understood the obvious hint: In the Torah it says "Do Not Murder." The goy looked at us with revulsion—little Jews, weaklings, cowards, trembling at a little blood. Now we are going to show them that we know war, too. Let them develop some respect for us."

The old woman dozed in the back of the bus. I sat near the driver and answered him:

"My father used to say, a Jew can do anything a goy can do and more. Brilliant — killing people! But to learn a bit of Chumesh with Rashi's commentary, that the goyim can't do. I am still an old-fashioned Jew who believes that "Loy bekheyl veloy bekoyekh..." *Not by arms and not by power, but by my spirit, said the Lord of hosts.*

And he answered me angrily:

"What do you have to do with scripture verses? You don't dress or conduct yourself like a religious Jew; let the rabbis break their heads interpreting verses. I think enough of us have died with verses in their mouths. Better to live with a gun in your hand."

"I hate Yevonim,<sup>1</sup>" I answered defiantly. "A yoven is a uniformed murderer. It is not fitting for Jews to boast about soldiers!"

He stopped the bus out of anger. The old woman woke up from the jostling. “What happened?” she asked, alarmed.

He set off again and began talking. Truly distressed, he poured out his bitter heart to me:

“For weeks now I’ve driven you back and forth, from Ra’anana to Tel-Aviv and from Tel-Aviv to Ra’anana, and I’ve heard enough of your speeches. You rarely stick to the subject. You are always chastising us and tormenting us. For sins of commission and sins of omission. Today you’re just talking nonsense. It could be that goyishe soldiers are uniformed murderers, but our soldiers saved the Yishuv! What do you think; we could have fought the English and the Arabs with bible quotations? And your United Nations in Lake Success, and your precious America? They understand one language — the fist! We...

p.77

punched back and we are going to keep punching. Blessed be the hand that aims and hits its mark! Uniformed murderers...” He spat out the words between his teeth. “It’s not right to talk like that. A Jewish soldier here in our land is a hero!”

I sighed. “What can I do. I still hate soldiers. I see no beauty in military parades and I can’t stand them. OK, so it can’t be helped. If people have to fight, they fight. There’s no choice. It’s not a novelty for Jews to stand up against our enemies. In the diaspora we also fought when we had to. One example is Tulchin. But to brag about guns and soldiers and make parades with them? This is not Jewish.”

“Nothing can be done with you,” he gestured dismissively. “You are a Jew of the Exile, an abject slave.”

I did not leave him wanting for an answer:

“You are from the diaspora yourself. Based on your Yiddish dialect, you are Ukrainian. Nevertheless, you talk like a saved Jew, like a third generation Israeli!”

He was driving in a hurry and spoke without looking in my direction:

“I only know one thing. If we had followed Jews like you, we would not have been able to build the country, and absolutely not been able to win it. We would have been killed off by the Arabs. I have been an *oytobus-nehag* (driver) for fourteen years and until this last year, when I left for work in the morning, I have never been sure that I would come back home alive at night. Before, when I left my wife and my children every day, we would part in silence. What use is all this philosophizing to me? We will build our country. If we are permitted to build it in peace, so much the better. If not, we’ll use force. We will not go like lambs to the slaughter; enough of being killed like sheep and enough wailing and lamenting in prayer to the Master of the Universe afterwards. And I am telling you: We will not only defend ourselves, we will be the attackers — but only to prevent calamity.”

Apparently he was waiting for me to answer, but I remained silent. He spoke again:

p. 78

“For me, it’s no privilege to be an *ato bekhartonunik*<sup>2</sup>, chosen by God to be slaughtered. To my way of thinking, if we parade with tanks, airplanes, artillery, the whole kit ‘n caboodle, then they’ll see it and be afraid.”

When I still did not answer him he spoke again, irritated:

“We are not just doing this for ourselves, but for all the Jews, even for you, so that you will have somewhere to come in time of need. You are fooling yourself. Calamity will come to you, too, in America. I’m telling you, exile has its logic.”

We rode the remaining part of the trip in silence. But interestingly, when he left me off in Ra’anana, he gave me his hand, smiled, and said:

“Don’t take offense at my sharp and angry words. You are a precious Jew, only you do not have the spirit of a normal citizen of a normal nation. You have the irrationality of a *Goles-Yid*<sup>3</sup>.

I pressed his hand and answered:

“To me, the State of Israel is still Yidn-Land, the Land of Israel, and one may register complaints against Yidn-Land. When I reach the point that I have no complaints with you, that will not be good. Then we will have become divided too far.”

“That’s true,” he said. “A Jew must always strive for perfection. There must always be Jews who have demands and complaints. We sometimes get angry but don’t take it to heart. We get angry because we, too, do not want to stop being Jews. You think we always agree among ourselves? Peace.”

He drove off.

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A week later, all the newspapers issued a call for the public to come to a Bialik<sup>4</sup> memorial, to be held at Bialik House on the anniversary of his death. The memorial would be conducted with the participation of the big shots of Hebrew Literature, among them Yakov Fichman, Asher Barash, and Isaac Dov Berkowitz.

My wife, my daughter and I came on time, at five o’clock...

p. 79



in the afternoon. We waited a half hour until the door of the house was opened. By half-past six there were forty people in the hall. The memorial began. At seven o'clock, I counted fifty-two people, over half of whom were American tourists. Yes, [Zalman] Shazar, the education minister, did come at the very end. All in all there were fifty-three people, including my thirteen-year-old daughter and two other children.

It was a tedious program, and not at all successful. A young writer read a long, drawn-out appraisal of Bialik. The talk lasted over an hour and the writer dwelled on every cliché that had ever been said of Bialik. Then, Yakov Fichman read a Bialik poem. He read very quietly, so you could barely catch the words. Finally, Asher Barash read some long and deeply patriotic essay he had found among Bialik's writings. The essay was not at all characteristic of Bialik. After the memorial a few people walked to Bialik's grave, which was not far from Bialik House.

I rode back to Ra'anana with my familiar bus driver. He greeted me:

"So, were you at Bialik's memorial?"

"How did you know?"

"I figured," he smiled, "that a man like you would not miss Bialik's yortsayt. There probably wasn't much of a crowd."

"Well, you guessed it, but you were not there," I wondered, "so how could you tell that only a few people went?"

"I know our people," he said, distressed. "Look, when it comes to this, you can be angry and have a justified complaint against us. You can write harshly about it."

"How did you know I will be writing about this?" I asked.

"A writer who visits the Land of Israel writes a book. Of course you will write a book. And you will probably criticize us more than enough. Today's criticism will be justified. It's really not good and not right for a military..."

p. 80

...parade to captivate the entire community and for Bialik's memorial to draw only a few dozen. Give it to us good, but without mercy! We ought to blush."

"I probably will, for your sake," I answered playfully.

When I got back to New York, I read a letter about Bialik's memorial in a Hebrew newspaper. The writer described how wonderfully the memorial was conducted. The hall was packed and the crowd was spellbound. It was not a total lie. The little hall could not hold more than fifty people. It was not his responsibility to mention that the balcony was empty. And the program is, after all, a matter of taste.

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1. *Yoven* [pl. *Yevonim*]. In this context, yevonim derives from a usage that means ‘Ukrainian policemen’, but also ‘thugs’.

2. A Jewish chauvanist (here, ironic), imported into Yiddish from the Hebrew, “You have chosen us”.

3. Goles can mean either ‘diaspora’ or, more commonly, ‘exile’. Among Zionists, the term Goles-Yid, or diaspora Jew, was not a compliment.

4. Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873 – 1934), a poet who wrote mostly in Hebrew, but also in Yiddish, recognized as Israel’s national poet.

## Chapter 8: Dr. Herzl in the Country of His Dreams

When they brought the casket with Dr. Herzl's bones to the State of Israel, they stopped it in Tel-Aviv to give the people an opportunity to pay their respects to the founder of political Zionism and the visionary of redemption in our time. The Yishuv was truly inspired by the idea of bringing Herzl's remains to Israel. The people saw it as confirmation of a true redemption. But the government understood that not everyone could come to the burial in Jerusalem (much as everyone wanted to go), so they decided to hold the casket in Tel-Aviv for a night. The city contains a quarter of a million Jews, more than a quarter of the population; and in addition, Tel-Aviv is easier to get to from the Galilee and the Jordan Valley. As it was impractical to let everyone come see the casket at the same time, someone came up with a good plan – they divided Tel-Aviv into four districts. Two hours were designated for each part of the city. So, between eight in the evening and four in the morning, the whole city would be able to come and look at the casket without crowding or danger.

On that day, we traveled from Ra'anana to our relatives in Tel-Aviv. We would stay there overnight, after going to look at Herzl's casket. The part of the city where my relative lived could view the casket from midnight until two in the morning, so we had a free evening. The Habima Theater advertised that the drama *BeArvot...*

p. 82

*Hanegev*, In the Wilderness of the Negev, would be performed that evening. We decided to go to the theater.

During the day, I went to buy tickets. I rode a good long way on the bus. I was surprised that the theater was not in the business center. I learned later that it was not doing the theater any harm.

I got out, not on a commercial street, but on a beautiful, peaceful square, surrounded by quiet. There, ringed with trees, was a magnificent round building. Dozens of steps led up to the ticket office. I stood on a broad platform overlooking the square. I've learned not to be surprised concerning cultural matters in the State of Israel. Our Ra'anana, as small a town as it is, has two bookstores. One bookstore sells newspapers, magazines, and light reading, while the other bookstore specializes in more substantial books. I would swear that Tel-Aviv has proportionally more bookstores than there are bars in New York. Still, I was impressed by the Habima Theater's wonderful building. It shows that the Yishuv understands that the State of Israel is not just the government of a small, balkanized people, without a tradition or a history. It's a Jewish community, saddled with a three-thousand-year cultural inheritance, and culture is much a part of its communal life as the tractor and the gun.

I went up to the ticket window. I spoke to the sales clerk in Yiddish:

“Give me good seats in the middle, not far from the stage. My family is not so well versed in Hebrew, in particular when it comes to Hebrew with the Sephardic pronunciation.”

She smiled. "I have tickets like that for you."

"Why are you laughing at me?" I asked.

"I'm not laughing," she answered, "Heaven forbid. But I've heard this refrain quite a few times. I've heard it in Moscow, then all over the diaspora, and especially in New York. In tourist season, I hear the same question here in Tel-Aviv. I would like to live long enough to see the day when all Jews know Hebrew."

p. 83

I very much wanted to have a conversation with her, but there was a long line of ticket buyers behind me.

I had read the drama "In the Wilderness of the Negev" before. The scenario is an old one. I'd read something similar twenty years earlier in English. Namely, the commander has to send someone on a very dangerous mission. The best person for the job is his only son. Of course, when his son is killed, the commander demonstrates his patriotism through his stoic behavior.

The playwright constructed the drama around this cliché. But the background, the milieu, was genuinely Israeli and the play did not read at all badly. Nothing earth shaking, but the drama was well-received in the Yishuv. To put it better, "In the Wilderness of the Negev" was a huge smash. The Jews of Israel were delighted, in particular, that the young hero of the play spoke a Hebrew slang. Additionally, one of the soldiers in the drama spoke Yiddish almost exclusively. The performance being such a sensation in the Yishuv, I naturally did not want to miss the opportunity to see the Habima's triumph.

The theater was packed. It was a weeknight, and not a special benefit performance, but you could not squeeze an ant in. The acting was terrific. What stood out most was that the young characters were actually played by young actors. It was a joy to see so many young people, both on the stage and in the audience. The three things that affected me the most, however, were the crowd, the actor who spoke Yiddish, and a Friday-night scene.

The audience provided the key for me to understand why the Yishuv is so captivated by this play. The attendees were mostly made up of people who had lived through the whole tragedy of the war. Besides the large number of soldiers in the theater, there were also a lot of fathers and mothers who had lost children in the battles. There were three such couples sitting in our row. Apparently, the losses in the war were so horrible that even now the toll has not been officially published. A woman sitting right next to us sobbed...

p. 84

quietly to herself. You could literally feel the tremble in the theater at every dangerous scene. On the stage they were acting, and acting well! In the seats, the horrors were being lived through in earnest. This made the performance not a play, but a dramatic reality.

The actor who spoke Yiddish with bad Hebrew mixed in portrayed a *gahal*, a soldier recruited from overseas. When he spoke Yiddish the theater all but shuddered. I had a double impression: Some of the crowd perked up when it suddenly heard such intimate, familiar and natural sounds and words from a non-artificial language of our own. Another portion of the crowd was simply ecstatic that Yiddish was being spoken from the stage at the Habima Theater. I witnessed such ecstasies in New York, when the actor James Cagney pronounced a few Yiddish words on the screen. Meanwhile, I learned that in the first performances, the *gahalnik* was portrayed not just as a nebbish, but as a coward, as a *goles-Yid* has to be according to theory. But the regular army soldiers and the Sabras raised a scandal: "It's a slander against Yiddish soldiers. The *gahalnikes* were just as good soldiers as the Sabras." So, the actors changed the character of the *gahalnik*. He still remained more than a little comic, especially in how he mixed in Hebrew with his Yiddish, but he conducted himself as heroically as all the other soldiers on the stage.

The Friday night scene in the printed play is not a spectacle. In the book, the author depicts a Friday night in a kibbutz during the siege. The people are hungry and dirty, in tattered clothes. The commandant of the kibbutz is talking with his future daughter-in-law and they remember the Friday nights in the kibbutz when it was peaceful in the land. Oh, how good it was! People would come back from the field, take a hot shower, and change their clothes. They would put on pressed trousers and a fresh shirt. They would polish their shoes and comb their hair. After showering, they would promenade. Then they would sit themselves down to eat without any hurry. The children sat...

p. 85

around the table with their mother and father. After the meal they would talk or watch a movie. They didn't have to hurry to go to sleep. After all, tomorrow was Shabbes!

That scene, as it had been depicted by the author, is a depiction of the true Friday night in most kibbutzim. Not a trace of the Sabbath solemnity or ceremony.

The stage play depicted a very different Friday night. Based on the performance, it turns out people light the candles on Friday nights in the kibbutz, they prepare a special meal and sing bits of prayers. The actors sang or, rather, recited verses from the weekly Torah portion Pinchas, using the tune from chanting the Torah. These passages hinted at what would happen later. The protagonist sang sweetly: "And on the Sabbath day, sacrifice two unblemished yearling lambs," a symbolic foreshadowing of the young martyrs.

Few in the audience felt that a lie was being reflected on the stage, because it was good theater. When I mentioned to a kibbutznik that kibbutz life is not like that, he answered:

"Theater does not always portray how life is. Often it depicts it how it has to be according to the logic of the action. Friday night has to be a Friday night when there is heart and faith. In a lot of kibbutzim, things are being tried out. Meanwhile, the reality is as exciting as raw potatoes, but they had to do something.

The performance left us feeling overwhelmed. We had absorbed the fear and struggle of the Yishuv and the joy of victory. We were left in a fitting mood to go see Dr. Herzl's casket. Bringing Herzl's remains here, was the appropriate finale of the war: Here is our triumph. The body of the man who dreamed of redemption has been brought home after years and years of wandering in exile.

It was a good distance to the Knesset and my wife had a bad leg, so we looked for a taxi. But all the taxis were taken. A taxi driver took pity on us and promised to come back for us from the Knesset and take us there.

p. 86

We stood at the corner and saw all the houses emptying. Men and women, children and old people, everyone was drawn to the Knesset. It was a clear, bright, moonlit night. The sound of the ocean could be heard from the distance, and the streets were black with people. But strangely, there was no commotion and no laughter. The crowd was earnest and quiet, as though in a religious mood. My relative said to me:

"It's hard to comprehend that we are living in such a miraculous time. Later generations will be jealous of us. The mind cannot fathom what we see before our eyes. There are people still alive who knew Dr. Herzl. You ought to still remember him. How long ago was it? But it's whole other world now. The shtetls of Poland, Lithuania and White Russia are gone. The Turk no longer rules this country. The Arabs have come to nothing – ran away. There is a free Jewish state with a parliament and Herzl is returning to the country that he dreamed of."

He went on talking, as if to himself:

"I still remember how it was forbidden even to mention Herzl's name in our observant Jewish household. Now the rabbi's grandson sits in parliament and my pious mother, in her eighties, made bandages for our Jewish soldiers during the war. I'm telling you, we are living in the Age of the Messiah. It's *askhalte-degeule*, the beginning of the redemption. Otherwise, it's impossible to imagine how boys and girls playing with shekls in the shtetl<sup>1</sup> could grow to become a Jewish state."

The taxi came. We got in and drove off. We did not ride for long. A military policeman stopped us. "*Ad khan*. You cannot drive any farther. The streets are fenced off."

We got out of the taxi. The crowd was dense, so dense that people were shoulder-to-shoulder. Every twenty meters there was a military policeman in full uniform, keeping order. But, in truth, they were extraneous. No more peaceful mass of people could be imagined. I had the feeling that these were the same Jews who went so devoutly to synagogue on Rosh Hashone and Yom Kippur. The whole shtetl used to head into

p.87

synagogue for the High Holidays just like this, and the houses would be left empty. Only babies in their cradles stayed home. They were not prouder, happier, more peaceful, or more secure than these Jews who were now walking towards the Knesset.

*Jews like grains of sand on the shore of the ocean!*<sup>2</sup> It was packed but there was no pushing. They walked and walked, quietly and seriously, Jews on a sacred day. I felt a strange trembling: I'd seen a scene like this before but something was missing. Suddenly, I remembered. This is just how I imagined the Israelites went to the Temple Mount, when they brought the first fruits to the Temple. One ought to say the appropriate verses from the Chumesh. And I stopped my wife, closed my eyes, and whispered quietly:

*My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and there he dwelt, few in number, and there he became a great and a mighty nation. And the Egyptians treated us badly, and afflicted us, and they burdened us with hard labor. And we cried out to God, our Lord, and he heard our voice, and he saw our torment, our exhaustion and our suffering. And God brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great fear, with signs and wonders. And he brought us to this place and he gave us the land...*

My relative shook me gently. "Dr. Simon, why are you saying some kind of prayer with your eyes half shut? We are here."

I opened my eyes. The fenced-off plaza near the ocean was flooded with light. Across from us on a high platform lay the casket, draped with the Jewish flag and encircled with tall electric lights in the shape of stearin candles. Two soldiers stood in front of the casket. They stood at attention, straight as bowstings, like statues with unsheathed swords in their right hands.

The military police led the line of people past the casket in a single file, not letting anyone linger for long. "Do not stop," they kept repeating, because the mass of people was limitless, impossible to count.

p.88

We braided our way into the row and, treading slowly, we approached the casket. When we had passed the casket and I looked towards the exit path from the boardwalk to the ocean, I noticed something behind the casket, right next to a high wall that had been erected to divide the casket from people who went outside the queue. A Jew was sitting there in a corner, rocking over a large volume of the Mishna. The Mishna lay on a tall stand, with an ordinary stearin candle burning there. The devout man rocked and hummed a traditional Gemara melody, his yarmulke raffishly tilted on the top of his head.

We set off home. There was an ambulance from the Mogen Dovid Adom a couple of hundred meters from the intersection. Nurses, several doctors, and a fair number of helpers sat on benches near the ambulances.

My relative asked: “So, have there been a lot of accidents?”

“So far, not a one,” answered a young doctor, “and it’s already almost two o’clock.”

It took us a full hour to drag ourselves home. I lay on my soft well-made-up bed for a long time and could not sleep. It’s strange. There are no surprises in Jewish history. Over three thousand years ago, according to the tradition, Joseph’s bones were brought here. Now Herzl’s. I thought: How would Herzl feel if he could see the parade people made around his casket with his own eyes? Surely, he would have been happy. He had likely seen generals, city leaders and other noteworthy dead people lying in state in their caskets in Vienna, bedecked with flags and with an honor guard of soldiers with unsheathed swords. Even the Jew with the yarmulke who sat tucked in a corner bent over the Mishnah was in “good taste”. Religion has its place in a modern state. It cannot have any authority, but it may not be ignored either. Yes, Herzl would have been happy. If one asked a Western European Jew how to receive a casket of a returning leader, he would say that one should make a parade just like the one they made.

p. 89

But on the other hand! What would someone like Ahad Ha’am have said about such a spectacle? Would it have made him happy to see this casket wrapped in flags and with two soldiers standing guard with their swords drawn, while off in a corner a Jew rocked over a Mishnah?

I knew the answer immediately. I recalled what Ahad Ha’am wrote about Herzl’s depiction (in his book, *Old New Land*) of Passover in his dreamed-of country:

“It is like monkeys imitating, without a trace of independent national content, and the spirit of 'slavery within freedom' is everywhere.”

The next morning at breakfast my relative said, “I could not sleep all night. I heard you tossing and turning. I’m telling you, *Happy are we who have lived to see such things with our own eyes.*”

I did not answer. He looked at me, put down his knife and fork and said: “Aha. I see, now, that something about it displeased you. Probably, it did not agree with your Yiddishkayt.”

I calmly admitted that in my sleeplessness I got to thinking, and added that I didn’t think it was right to make such a goyish spectacle.

He sighed. “You never let up. It seems like everything is well and good. Then, suddenly, aha! Off you go again, demanding the impossible. Who could satisfy you? Who, I ask?”

Maybe he was right.

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1. Before *shekls* were an Israeli currency, the word was used to refer to membership cards or dues in an East European Zionist organization.
2. See Genesis 22:17.

## Chapter 9: Kfar Hogla

Day in, and day out, there was a pure, deep-blue sky and bright sunshine. When you got up in the morning you could tell it was definitely not going to rain. The brightness and sunniness were deeper and more tangible than in America. And the nights? *Ma yafim haleylot bekhnan*, “How beautiful are the nights in Canaan,” as the poet<sup>1</sup> says. It’s good that the poet was spare with words and did not try to describe the nights in the Land of Israel. You have to stand on a veranda yourself, late at night in a small town or in a kibbutz somewhere, to truly feel the beauty and tranquility of the night, the silvery shine of the moon, the brightness of the stars and the clarity of the air.

The first couple of weeks you are intoxicated by the climate. You cannot get enough of the warmth, the light, and the dryness. But, bit by bit, it gets harder for you to move around in the middle of the day. You need to lie down in the afternoon. You begin to take care not to walk midday without a hat, and you feel like you cannot move as quickly and spontaneously as in our climate.

Nevertheless, you do not feel heavy or bedraggled. You do not feel the weight of your body the way you do on a hot day in New York. On the contrary, in your body’s half laziness, you feel a mental alertness, an exaltation, and a constant ecstasy. The senses are sharpened and you are receptive to everything around you. You begin to think that...

p. 91

the exaltations of the prophets could have arisen only here. You begin to believe that the passage in the Gemora has something to it: *The air in the Land of Israel makes people smart*. It makes a person more alert, and he can grasp things quicker and more deeply.

I write all of this because it occurred to me that over the course of the three months I was in Israel, I do not remember a single day that weighed me down with emptiness, boredom and purposelessness. Every day was like a tautly-drawn bow, filled with expectation, with inner restlessness and with joy.

True, I traveled a lot and walked around a lot, and these impressions needed to be digested and made my own. But still, there were days when I sat on the porch with my brother and did nothing but read, smoke, write, chatter with children and look at the occasional passerby.

But it could also be that I was not emotionally oversaturated because life was both different and familiar. The whole heritage of ancient times and of the recent past gave it an old-new character I could never get enough of. I was in the category of an older man who comes to his old home and every detail reminds him of his happy and carefree youth and, at the same time, in the category of a child who is seeing things for the first time.

And so, each trip, though often not more than twenty or thirty miles from Ra’anana, was an event for me.

Before I set out for the kibbutzim, I got several smaller trips out of the way. I have a lot of childhood friends in Israel. I have three close friends in particular: one in Holon, near Tel-Aviv (about which I will talk in another chapter), and two younger friends in Kfar Hogla.

Kfar Hogla lies in Hefer Valley, or better, in the Hefer region, a small part of which is in the former Sumaria and the larger part in the former Judea. But Kfar Hogla is in the part that was in Sumaria, at the foot of the Mountains of Ephraim. Right next to Hogla are the village of “Kfar Haroeh,” (which is really named after Rabbi Kook, but the inhabitants interpret it as the village of the seer, meaning the prophet) and the kibbutz “Givat Haim”.

The words themselves: Hefer Valley, Mountains of Ephraim, Village of the Seer, are really not...

p. 92

just words. For those of us who studied Torah, they bring up images and associations that have left marks in our souls.

I was interested in why the village was named Hogla. The explanation given to me was as follows:

“According to the commentaries, the five daughters of Zelophehad [צלפחד] were names of cities found in the Hefer Valley. The founders did not want to name the village after Zelophehad’s first daughter, because Makhala means ‘illness’. The second daughter was named Noa, which means a wanderer, and that was not a fitting name either. Therefore, the village was named for the third daughter, Hogla, which means ‘dancer’”.

I was told it took long nights of discussion until they could come to agreement on the name.

Kfar Hogla is not far from Ra’anana. With a good car the whole journey would not take more than twenty or twenty-five minutes. But with the Israeli buses, the trip took almost three hours, and it seemed like God knows how far. It accorded with the concept of Ephraim Mountains. The Mountains of Ephraim cannot be right near where you live. They must be God knows how far.

We were not able to get a ticket directly to Kfar Hogla. We bought a ticket to Kfar Haroeh. The driver left us off near the sign of “Kfar Haroeh” and told us to take a right at the corn fields.

My brother, my daughter and I followed his direction. We went off on the sandy road that wound between the fields. We walked and walked, and did not see any sign of a settlement. Suddenly we saw figures approaching in the distance. We stopped and waited. Better to ask than to get lost.

I sighted a Yemeni Jew with a thin little beard and long peyes. He was leading a small donkey. A boy around twelve years old drove the donkey with a cut branch. I stood there, agape. Against the backdrop of the green fields, they looked just like they had stepped out of a page of the Talmud.

We greeted the Yemenite Jew and asked the way to Kfar Hogla. He stopped and began to chant directions in an exotic melody.

p. 93

“If you go straight it is around three kilometers to Kfar Hogla. But you will have to go through vineyards and orange groves, which would not be an easy path. Better would be to go back to the highway and go right until the fork in the road. Go right again onto the new road and you will come right to Kfar Hogla. Oh, come on, you are going to say,” he said in the strange melody that was like some kind of cross between a prayer and our Gemore nign<sup>2</sup>, “you have already walked more than half a kilometer to get here? Well, it is a loss you can’t get back — it’s done.”

We walked back with him to the highway. He told us that he has been in the country for twelve years. It was hard, very hard, for him to live. Now that a Yemenite community has settled here in an abandoned Arab village, it is easier for him. He has a roof over his head, a bit of a garden and a field. Plus, he has worked in an orchard for years. But he is a poor man, one of the little people and, he startled me by saying the two words in English, he does not have any “Vitamin P”, which means, patronage. If had had a little respect in the community, he would have been given a better house, and his bit of a field would be closer to the village.

We were back up on the road, said goodbye to the Yeminite and thanked him. We set out for Kfar Hogla. We had walked a fair bit, but still had not seen a sign. We noticed a group of workers, working on the road. We stopped and asked them the way. A middle-aged man wiped the sweat off his forehead and answered. “Go shtraight on this road. You’re walking in the right directsen. You cannot mish the sign. It’s not hard to find the village.”<sup>3</sup>

Having finished talking, he gave a big sigh.

“Ah, my Litvak,” I answered him, “but why are you sighing like that? It is written, *Bezeyes afekho... By the sweat of your brow shall you earn your bread.*”

“Yes,” the Litvak answered, “it is so written. But have you ever done roadwork, my American uncle, and had to speak Hebrew on top of it? I do not have the shtrength to do both at once.”

We easily found the intersection with the...

p. 94

sign for Kfar Hogla, under a bigger sign reading “Givat Haim.” We turned onto the road to the village.

Apparently, the road was a lot longer than everyone thought. Or maybe we were tired from the heat and from having gotten lost. We walked and we walked. There were green fields on both sides, with sprinklers watering the vegetables. It was beautiful to see the spray of hundreds of thousands of drops of water, creating rainbows. But the pleasure couldn’t really sink in, because we were so tired and so thirsty.

The road led us through vineyards and orange groves. It grew shady and cooler. The heat no longer exhausted us, but the thirst had not let up.

We came to a narrow road, right beside the fence of a vineyard. There was a little wheelbarrow with watermelons. We stopped.

“Let’s take a watermelon,” I said, “and slake our thirst.”

My daughter protested. “That would be stealing.”

My brother said, “Let’s call someone.” He put his hands to his mouth and yelled. “*Bal-Hakerem! Eykho?* (Vineyard proprietor, where are you?)”

The expression sounded strange and exotic. For me, the word ‘eykho’ brought up associations with the Chumesh, when God called to Adam, “*Eykho*— Where are you?” But even more, the simple expression ‘bal-hakerem’. It reminded me of a passage from the Talmud<sup>4</sup>: *The proprietor of the vineyard* (i.e. God) *shall come and wipe out the thorns*. There stood my brother calling out: “You, God, where are you?”

My brother repeated his call again and again. No one answered.

“So, we’ll open a watermelon,” I said, coming back to the present. “Nobody answered.” My daughter was not satisfied.

p. 95

“No. It’s still stealing. You shall not steal.”

I made a compromise. I wrote a receipt and stick it to another watermelon with a pin.

“I, Doctor Shloyme Simon, from Brooklyn in America, temporarily residing in Ra’anana, have taken a watermelon without your authorization. If you write to Ra’anana, I will send you the five piasters (15 cents).”

My daughter was appeased, and we opened the watermelon and slaked our thirst.

We arrived in Kfar Hogla.

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My two friends live next door to each other. I came in through the yard and found them in the vegetable garden, sorting tomatoes, green peppers and cucumbers. They both stood there, dressed identically in pants and undershirts, barefoot and bare-headed. Their hair had not been cut for months. They looked like typical peasants. Naturally, they did not recognize me, but they knew my brother and guessed correctly who I was. Zalman, the younger one, clapped his hands, and said, “Shloymke! Finally, you’ve come to us. Wait, let me wipe my hands on the grass and

give you a proper handshake. Nu? Meyer,” he turned to his friend and neighbor, “did you recognize him?”

Meyer also wiped his hands. “If he had a beard, he would resemble his father. But recognize? After thirty-eight years you wouldn’t even recognize your own brother.”

Inside, there was a celebration. Both of their wives were also from my shtetl. There was a brief squabble over where we should eat, until they finally decided to take the table out onto the veranda and bring out food from both kitchens.

“Black Hannah,” as Zalman’s wife was known, said, with real regret:

“If we were expecting you, we would have prepared a hot meal that would really be delicious. But what can we give you now? Kalinkovitch food. A *perlgroypenem kripnik* [barley soup], *fish-potatoes* [a potato soup with fish], and blintzes.”

“Listen, Black Hannah,” I said. “It’s good that you did not expect me and prepare fancy...

p.96

pastries. Serve the comfort food and let’s enjoy it. It’s been a long time since I had any fish-potatoes or a homemade kripnik.”

Zalman brought out a bottle of wine from somewhere and smacked the top with the palm of his hand, sending the cork shooting up to the ceiling. We poured the wine, toasted *lechaim*, and sat down to eat. After the meal, once the table was cleared, another bottle of wine was brought in. We drank, smoked, and started our conversation.

They explained to me what a worker’s moshav means, and how the cooperative works. I listened patiently, as though I was completely unfamiliar with the subject. It’s very curious to see the enthusiasm of the Israeli Jews. Every one talks about his moshav, his kibbutz, his region, as if as though there was nothing similar in the whole of the Yishuv. Each of them had started from scratch and speaks with the pleasure of the creator.

After a while I began to pose questions. I have to admit that my questions were not tactful ones. Fundamentally, I was interested in provoking or interrogating people to get at the real answer, not the rehearsed, accepted, or cliché answer.

“Listen,” I said, “I have known you both since you were boys. You come from fine Jewish families. Your fathers knew how to study. Both of you, as far as I remember, were also good students. You knew your way around a page of Talmud, and were acquainted with both Hebrew and Yiddish literature. You were what we once called intellectuals. Nowadays, I guess we would say ‘intellectually progressive young men’. I ask you, is it an achievement to come to Erets Yisroyl and become simple peasants, just like the peasants in the villages around our shtetl? The two of you look just like Kartsayer muzhiks (Kartsaye was a village near our town, with very lowly peasants).”

Zalman answered.

p. 97

“Let Meyer talk. It’s true I am a closer friend of yours, but he speaks better than I do.”

And Meyer spoke:

“Yes, on the outside we look like the same peasants as in Kartsaye or Dudovitch, but with two exceptions: We became peasants consciously, and our cultural level is no lower than it was in our fathers’ homes. Of course, we don’t have the same values. We read at least one newspaper a day, sometimes two. We pick up a book. I ask you, what Kartsayer peasant had a bookshelf in his house? We send our children to high school. Did they do that?

“I said we became peasants consciously. We knew from the beginning that we were taking on a very low economic level for a certain time. We freely relinquished all the urban comforts. We argued that there was too much “silk” in the shtetl. Do you remember S. Ben-Zion’s story, “Meshi” (Silk)? A city full of young men dressed in silk, without a floor beneath their feet. We decided to root ourselves in the land. We didn’t just sing “*In der sokhe ligt di mazl-brokhe*”<sup>5</sup>, but we began with ourselves. Made the clean break ourselves.

“And another thing. We wanted a little more security in this non-Jewish world. I know full well that the misfortune that our brothers met with over there could also have happened here. But it would have been different here. We would have been able to position ourselves against our enemies better than they could. Here there were not only cities, but also hinterlands. There were a lot of Moshavs like ours in the country. Groupos of several houses far from the main highway, tucked into the woods and close to the mountains. We would not have been as helpless as they were. And you, too, could end up like them.

“On the outside we are peasants, like any peasants in the world. You saw it yourself: We work in the fields in pants and an undershirt. We are sunburned. We move slowly and deliberately. From a certain point of view we are like *the children of Noah, who may be executed for a groshen*<sup>6</sup>. Our subsistence is that hard to come by. But we are different, after all. As you would say: ‘We are Jewish peasants.’ Jews are different.”

p. 98

He stopped, and said apologetically:

“Here I gave you a whole Zionist speech, and I hate speeches, and Zionist speeches above all.”

I did not drop it, though.

“Altogether you have fifty dunams of land. With intensive cultivation you can get by as is. But what will you do with the children? A peasant wants his children to stay on his land. Let’s suppose it doesn’t bother you if your sons and daughters, if you have more than one, leave to

found other moshavim or kibbutzim. Still, in order for the moshav to remain a moshav, you would have to keep at least one child with you. How can fifty dunems provide for two families?"

"This problem has caused plenty of sleepless nights," he replied. We knew the only solution was to acquire more land. Our territory belongs to Keren Kayemet [the Jewish National Fund]. So, we tried to buy more land from the neighboring Arabs. But they wouldn't sell. Now, after the victory, people say everyone should be given twenty more dunems of land. That is, everyone who has a son or a married daughter who wants to stay on their father's land. Let the other sons and daughters go, as you said, and found other workers collectives or kibbutzim. The Sharon [Plain] is settled well enough, but the Galilee and the Negev are abandoned. If only we had enough people for that land that we have now."

I kept asking questions. "You say you send your children to high school. How can such a small moshav afford a high school?"

"It's hard. We partnered with another moshav. The children have to travel far. The problem is, we actually are like our fathers. We are ready to draw blood over the tiniest thing. It's a long story, but I'll make it short.

"The kibbutz Givat Haim borders us right here, starting right here, just behind Zalman's fence. When we arrived here and had several children growing up, we thought we would have nothing to worry about when it came to a children's school. Our children would go to school at the kibbutz. Of course we would carry our share of the...

p.99

financial burden. Well, the kibbutzniks said, 'absolutely not.' We complained to the Mapai and to the Mapam. *Imru Elohim* – Go yell at the wall. There was nothing we could do. We started our own kindergarten. But we had to send the older children to another moshav.

"And now you still have not come to an agreement?" I asked.

"Foolish question. You don't understand the kibbutzniks. They do not even let their children play with ours. Some of us say it's because they do not want their children to know that there are Jews who own their own house, have their own stable with a cow of their own, and a bit of a field, who nevertheless are not exploiters or bloodsuckers, neither are we hopeless cases, living off other people's toil. But I think they are simply afraid for their own theoretical system. According to Marx and Engels, as small farmers we moshavniks ought to be backwards, reactionaries and enemies of the working class. You should understand that in the kibbutz the children learn that Moses brought the Jews out from Egypt and led them straight into the kibbutz. The couple of thousand years between the Exodus and the founding of the kibbutz were unimportant, a blank page in Jewish history."

Zalman laughed.

"Nu, enough sermonizing, Meyer. Let's show him our farm."



I went with them, just as though I had not seen a single solitary farm in the country. I did not want to tell them that one chicken coop looks just like any other, that all calves have the same face, and that a vegetable garden is a garden with vegetables growing in it. Of course I couldn't tell them that I could not get excited about their food stores. I could not say so, because they were walking with me to show me fifteen years of toil and sweat, fifteen years of working and watering earth that had been neglected for a thousand years, which they had forced to grow vegetables and trees. Red earth, overgrown with thorns and dried grasses, now transformed into orange groves and vineyards.

They took me up to the top of the water tower. We could see the landscape for dozens of kilometers around. Just there...

p. 100

on the mountain, where it seemed as though you could reach them with your hand, were Arab villages.

My companion smiled and said:

“Yes, there is great danger. Our enemies live right under our noses. And there are enough refugees there in those Arab villages. Often, they smuggle themselves over to our side. When they're caught and are asked what they are doing on the Jewish side, they answer, 'We came to see what is happening on our farm or house.' You will say we are in danger, a lot more danger than you are in the diaspora. But you should understand that fate has played into our hands. The Zionist fantasy we dreamed about has become reality, and the practical, reasoned speeches of yesterday's 'scholars' have turned out to be wrong. I can remember it now, what your Yitskhok Isaac ben Aryeh-Tsvi Halevi Hurvitsh wrote. I have the second volume of his writings in my house and page eighty-one is marked with a dog-ear:

*Not in Uganda, not in Jerusalem—the future Zion will be in liberated Warsaw.*

“So, Warsaw is liberated. Where are the Jews? Now, after our current victory, we may be too optimistic. Of course there is danger in our exaggerated optimism. But when people have literally seen miracles with their own eyes, would you frighten them with catching cold?”

I did not have the heart to argue with him.

It had gotten late. We had to ride back. They drove us with a horse and wagon back to the paved road where the bus stopped. We said our goodbyes. The last thing they said was, “Stay here. Why are you going back? Are you going to wait until a Hitler comes to America? Here we will come up with an answer.”

This last speech was not new to me. I heard it on day one from a child, and from then on from everyone who had a mouth to say it with. By now I had been in the country for fourteen days. When I had sat down on the bus, I took a look at my notebook. It was the hundred and eightieth

time that I'd heard this warning from the Jews in Israel. From that day on, I stopped recording and counting.

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1. Yitshak Katzenelson (1885-1944).
2. Gemore nign. The tune to which the Talmud is chanted when studying.
3. Here Simon switches some of the 'sh' and 's' sounds to show the speaker's Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) dialect.
4. A rare case where Simon misidentifies the source of a verse. The image of the neglected vineyard appears earlier, in Isaiah 5: 1-7.
5. "In the plow, good fortune is found." From the song *The Plow* by Eliakum Zunsar.
6. [translator's note] I don't know how widespread this expression, or this thought was. I suppose it should be included under the header, "better to acknowledge than sweep under the rug." see: [https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.47b.6?vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.47b.6?vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

## Chapter 10: A Hakhshore [preparatory] Kibbutz and a Children's Village

I drew up a list of kibbutzim to visit. But before I set out, I did not want to overlook what was happening around Ra'anana. I did not want to be like those tourists who come to America, rent a room in New York, and then set out across the country without ever seeing New York.

Every nook and every village in Yidn-Land has its own flavor. It's very different than in America, where you have to travel many miles in order to see some variation in Jewish life. In Israel there will be something remarkable, built on a completely different foundation, a fifteen-minute walk from you.

Jewish life in America is stable, more or less cast from one mold. In the State of Israel it is different. Even before it became the State of Israel, the Yishuv had taken upon itself to remake the Jewish people. A new principle was established: The individual must not only take care of his own spiritual and material happiness, but his fate must be woven into the fate of the community. The people stands in the center of the individual's life and he, the individual, must organize his personal life according to the demands of the people.

One could say that this agrees with the direction of modern times. The tendency of the last decades is to place the nation, the state, in the center of individual life. Still there is a great difference between Israel and other countries.

p. 102

In the last three and a half decades, the Jewish People has suffered frightfully. The apex of the suffering came during the time of Hitler, may his name be blotted out. The damage that was done to the Jewish body and the Jewish soul was monstrously large. The State of Israel has taken it upon itself to repair the damage on a national scale. Such an undertaking requires a more ethical approach to the individual than in established countries. Other well-established countries can afford to ignore the individual, in order for the nation to get back on its feet. But the State of Israel must first rehabilitate the individual, in order for the state to establish itself.

And because the people is in the process of recreating itself, it requires a lot of freedom for the individual to have the choice of how to adapt himself. Therefore, wherever you look and wherever you turn, you see something different, something new, which surprises and astonishes you.

On a stretch of territory near Ra'anana, smaller than from Flatbush to Williamsburg, you can find: Kibbutzim, workers cooperatives (moshavs), individual farms, hakhshore [preparatory, or technical training] kibbutzim, and children's villages. You can get to many of them on foot. Before setting out for more distant trips, I visited these places near Ra'anana.

I took a walk over to the hakhshore kibbutz S-H.

Surrounding the kibbutz are well-cultivated, green fields. There are fine vegetable gardens and a substantial orchard— an orange grove. Several cows were pastured in a meadow, and the sounds of clucking chickens carried from the yard.

I went into a large courtyard. The grass had been cut. There were well-maintained flowerbeds and trees, lush with branches, cast shadows on the grass.

On the grass beneath the trees, there were young parents playing with their children. I greeted them, and sat down near the children.

The kibbutz was half empty. Half of the kibbutzniks were in the Negev, readying the permanent kibbutz. They come every two weeks to see their families.

My reception, as everywhere in Israel, was friendly and openhearted. Everyone was willing to answer my questions.

No one in the Kibbutz is more than twenty three years old. They are from...

p. 103

Aliyat Hanoar—from the Youth Aliyah. The largest number come from Egypt, with smaller numbers from Morocco, Turkey, and other countries. They have been in the country for two to three years. They all know Hebrew. Among themselves they speak a variety of languages: Arabic, French, and Turkish. But there was one girl there who spoke Yiddish with me. She came from Rumania. The girl wasn't even eighteen years old. She's been married almost a year. She was in Cyprus, and met her husband there. At first they communicated with one another through signs.

They took me around to show me their poor households. They led me through their dining hall, the children's room, the children's bedrooms, and then through their own huts.

They did not need a school for their children yet. None of their children are more than a year old. However, they did need a lot of children's beds. They could not always afford to buy finished beds. The homemade beds that they have clapped together are something to look at.

"We are going to bring it all with us to the Negev," they told me. "We will leave only the buildings and the two Singer sewing machines, for repairing old clothes, that we found in the big workshop when we came here. Everything else is ours. We worked for it. We expect to be in the Negev soon after Rosh Hashone.

"Why did we work the fields so thoroughly and plant such beautiful flowerbeds, if we are getting ready to move? OK, we are here temporarily, but the earth is permanent. Others will come in our place, just as we came once the earlier kibbutz went away."

I sat on the grass with them, wanting to know all about why they came to Israel. Had they keenly felt the anti-Semitism in their countries? Were they escaping poverty? Did they come to build Yidn-Land? Were they uneasy about the fate of Judaism?

Most of them said nothing, but shrugged their shoulders. They did not know why they came. Some said to me:

“We were not told the truth. The leaders of the Youth Aliyah promised us the sun, the moon and the stars. Well, when we got here and...

p. 104

saw the real situation, we could not go back. We were not allowed. But now we are content to be here.”

Others said:

“No we did not suffer much from anti-Semitism up to now. But who knows what will happen tomorrow? In the end, they will slaughter us.”

A young woman who was as dark as a gypsy, holding a lighter-skinned boy in her arms, spoke up frankly:

“What use is a “Zionist sermon” to me? It’s good to live among your own people. It’s good to not have to carry the burden of Jewishness. Is that such a small thing—to be a Jew and not feel that weight? For me it’s more than enough.”

I spent until late in the afternoon with them. I met with them often over the course of the twelve weeks or so I was in Israel. My brother’s house was right on the way from the kibbutz into Ra’Anana. They would greet me when they went by, and often stopped to chat. It grew clear to me that this Youth Aliyah could not have come about merely through negativity. Maybe these young immigrants did not know it, but it was clear to me that most of them had come to free themselves from “Jewishness as an afterthought”. They were sick of living a double life – gentile the whole week, and Jewish for a few hours – and of bearing the yoke, the weight of a Judaism that made no sense to them. Here in Israel they could conduct themselves like the neighboring gentiles as much as they were able, and still not deny who they were. I believe this is probably the driving force for a lot of young immigrants.

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Around ten minutes away from Ra’Anana by bus, there is a children’s village. In America we would call it an orphanage, but in Israel this is not only a place where orphans, collected from throughout Europe, are supported or maintained. It’s a village where children are prepared to become citizens of the new Jewish people and members of the new economy. This is not just flowery talk. When you get to know this village, you see how exceptional and unique it is among orphanages.

p. 105

The village takes up a large area. I could not find out how much acreage it has. But I walked with a group for more than an hour, and everything they pointed out to me – there, that bit of ground, that field, that vegetable garden – belongs to the village.

The houses are marvelously well built. Of course, there is a beautiful children's school, a synagogue, fine sleeping quarters, common areas, and play places. But there is also more: Stables with cows and horses, a garage with trucks and regular automobiles, a metal shop, and also cultivated fields, orange groves, vegetable gardens, and vineyards. The children work all of them. There were no outside workers there – only the instructors.

The village is supported by American money. I will not go into the details of how the village was founded, how the children were gathered or how the whole idea of the village originated. That's not my point. What is important to emphasize is that the core principle is not just to help the children and to rehabilitate them physically and psychologically. That would be done in America, too. What is important is that the workers and the children view this accomplishment as important work on behalf of the nation. Every child feels that he has to pay back the people for supporting him. They look at themselves not just as saved children, but as saved Jewish children.

I walked around with two boys, one fifteen and the other sixteen years old. The younger one spoke Yiddish and Hebrew, the older French and Hebrew. We walked through a field and I asked questions. The younger boy spoke for both of them:

They would like to go to be in a kibbutz, but he, the younger one, has a mother, so he has to take care of her. The older boy has no one, but one of his hands is partly paralyzed and he does not know if he will be able to be admitted into a kibbutz. Both are studying radio mechanics. When they leave there, they are going to open a business together.

"Yes, they can do field work, they know their way around horses, they can take care of cows and chickens. Everyone has to be able to do that. Then, they can each choose their subject, their trade.

p. 106

"No, no one is making them speak Hebrew. They can talk to each other in whatever language they want. But Hebrew is spoken in the school, in the synagogue, in the workshops, in the field and stables, and around the chicken coops – because that is the only language the instructors speak. So it happens that Hebrew quickly becomes the language in circulation.

"Everything here is done by the children. No one forces them to work, especially at first, but before you know it, everyone is working together with his group.

"At age eighteen, everyone can leave the village. A few stay on as instructors. Most want to settle in the kibbutzim or moshavs in the frontier areas."

I spoke Yiddish with the young men. The older one listened intently, trying to understand our conversation. Soon he did join in, addressing me in Hebrew:

“We will live in the cities if necessary. But we know that it is really important to settle the Negev and the other unpopulated areas. It’s not our fault if we cannot do it. And maybe later we will not live in the cities. We are still young.”

Later, I spoke with one of the teachers. He told me about the challenges they have had with

abandoned and neglected orphans. Many of them lacked the slightest feeling of social responsibility. They did not understand why stealing and cheating, when they were useful, were crimes. Punishment would not help. Just the opposite—if you punished them, they would consider the village to be a continuation of the concentration camp, and the teachers and instructors to be like camp guards and supervisors. What did have a powerful effect on them was to indoctrinate them with the idea that their bad deeds would shame the whole Jewish people. They must build a nation in order to gain respect... from the goyim. Naturally, we also surrounded them with love and faithful care. We saw to it that they had everything that they need and often not just what they need, but even what they want. Now there are practically no problem children here.

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They took me around to show me their poor households. They led me through their dining hall, the children's room, the children's bedrooms, and then through their own huts.

They did not need a school for their children yet. None of their children are more than a year old. However, they did need a lot of children's beds. They could not always afford to buy finished beds. The homemade beds that they have clapped together are something to look at.

"We are going to bring it all with us to the Negev," they told me. "We will leave only the buildings and the two Singer sewing machines, for repairing old clothes, that we found in the big workshop when we came here. Everything else is ours. We worked for it. We expect to be in the Negev soon after Rosh Hashone.

"Why did we work the fields so thoroughly and plant such beautiful flowerbeds, if we are getting ready to move? OK, we are here temporarily, but the earth is permanent. Others will come in our place, just as we came once the earlier kibbutz went away."

I sat on the grass with them, wanting to know all about why they came to Israel. Had they keenly felt the anti-Semitism in their countries? Were they escaping poverty? Did they come to build Yidn-Land? Were they uneasy about the fate of Judaism?

Most of them said nothing, but shrugged their shoulders. They did not know why they came. Some said to me:

“We were not told the truth. The leaders of the Youth Aliyah promised us the sun, the moon and the stars. Well, when we got here and...

p. 104

saw the real situation, we could not go back. We were not allowed. But now we are content to be here.”

Others said:

“No we did not suffer much from anti-Semitism up to now. But who knows what will happen tomorrow? In the end, they will slaughter us.”

A young woman who was as dark as a gypsy, holding a lighter-skinned boy in her arms, spoke up frankly:

“What use is a “Zionist sermon” to me? It’s good to live among your own people. It’s good to not have to carry the burden of Jewishness. Is that such a small thing—to be a Jew and not feel that weight? For me it’s more than enough.”

I spent until late in the afternoon with them. I met with them often over the course of the twelve weeks or so I was in Israel. My brother’s house was right on the way from the kibbutz into Ra’Anana. They would greet me when they went by, and often stopped to chat. It grew clear to me that this Youth Aliyah could not have come about merely through negativity. Maybe these young immigrants did not know it, but it was clear to me that most of them had come to free themselves from “Jewishness as an afterthought”. They were sick of living a double life – gentile the whole week, and Jewish for a few hours – and of bearing the yoke, the weight of a Judaism that made no sense to them. Here in Israel they could conduct themselves like the neighboring gentiles as much as they were able, and still not deny who they were. I believe this is probably the driving force for a lot of young immigrants.

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Around ten minutes away from Ra’Anana by bus, there is a children’s village. In America we would call it an orphanage, but in Israel this is not only a place where orphans, collected from throughout Europe, are supported or maintained. It’s a village where children are prepared to become citizens of the new Jewish people and members of the new economy. This is not just flowery talk. When you get to know this village, you see how exceptional and unique it is among orphanages.

p. 105

The village takes up a large area. I could not find out how much acreage it has. But I walked with a group for more than an hour, and everything they pointed out to me – there, that bit of ground, that field, that vegetable garden – belongs to the village.

The houses are marvelously well built. Of course, there is a beautiful children's school, a synagogue, fine sleeping quarters, common areas, and play places. But there is also more: Stables with cows and horses, a garage with trucks and regular automobiles, a metal shop, and also cultivated fields, orange groves, vegetable gardens, and vineyards. The children work all of them. There were no outside workers there – only the instructors.

The village is supported by American money. I will not go into the details of how the village was founded, how the children were gathered or how the whole idea of the village originated. That's not my point. What is important to emphasize is that the core principle is not just to help the children and to rehabilitate them physically and psychologically. That would be done in America, too. What is important is that the workers and the children view this accomplishment as important work on behalf of the nation. Every child feels that he has to pay back the people for supporting him. They look at themselves not just as saved children, but as saved Jewish children.

I walked around with two boys, one fifteen and the other sixteen years old. The younger one spoke Yiddish and Hebrew, the older French and Hebrew. We walked through a field and I asked questions. The younger boy spoke for both of them:

They would like to go to be in a kibbutz, but he, the younger one, has a mother, so he has to take care of her. The older boy has no one, but one of his hands is partly paralyzed and he does not know if he will be able to be admitted into a kibbutz. Both are studying radio mechanics. When they leave there, they are going to open a business together.

“Yes, they can do field work, they know their way around horses, they can take care of cows and chickens. Everyone has to be able to do that. Then, they can each choose their subject, their trade.

p. 106

“No, no one is making them speak Hebrew. They can talk to each other in whatever language they want. But Hebrew is spoken in the school, in the synagogue, in the workshops, in the field and stables, and around the chicken coops – because that is the only language the instructors speak. So it happens that Hebrew quickly becomes the language in circulation.

“Everything here is done by the children. No one forces them to work, especially at first, but before you know it, everyone is working together with his group.

“At age eighteen, everyone can leave the village. A few stay on as instructors. Most want to settle in the kibbutzim or moshavs in the frontier areas.”

I spoke Yiddish with the young men. The older one listened intently, trying to understand our conversation. Soon he did join in, addressing me in Hebrew:

“We will live in the cities if necessary. But we know that it is really important to settle the Negev and the other unpopulated areas. It’s not our fault if we cannot do it. And maybe later we will not live in the cities. We are still young.”

Later, I spoke with one of the teachers. He told me about the challenges they have had with

abandoned and neglected orphans. Many of them lacked the slightest feeling of social responsibility. They did not understand why stealing and cheating, when they were useful, were crimes. Punishment would not help. Just the opposite—if you punished them, they would consider the village to be a continuation of the concentration camp, and the teachers and instructors to be like camp guards and supervisors. What did have a powerful effect on them was to indoctrinate them with the idea that their bad deeds would shame the whole Jewish people. They must build a nation in order to gain respect... from the goyim. Naturally, we also surrounded them with love and faithful care. We saw to it that they had everything that they need and often not just what they need, but even what they want. Now there are practically no problem children here.

## Chapter 11: Two Kibbutzim in Sharon

One of the oldest kibbutzim is right near Ra'Anana<sup>1</sup>. Getting there by bus is like getting the Hebrews out from Egypt. I hired a taxi. The trip cost all of a half pound (a dollar and a half), and it took sixteen minutes to get there. We came back by bus. The trip took around two hours, including waiting and a change of buses.

We arrived at lunchtime. I went in to the secretary and introduced myself. He shook my hand warmly and said:

“We have a custom in the kibbutzim to go and eat first of all. We should go to the dining hall. But, since you are here, I will show you our arsenal. Before, under English rule, we had to keep it hidden, so no harm would befall it. Now we are in charge.”

He led me into a locked side room and showed me all kinds of guns and other weapons. I am no expert on these things, and I do not know whether the rifles and light machine guns were first class ones. But there were a good many weapons there, enough to outfit a couple of hundred people. I played dumb:

And why do you need to have these weapons? Don't you have an army now?

p. 108

He smiled:

“What do you mean? The party is over, and that's that? How far are we from the border? Hopefully they will not be needed, but if we have to go back into the trenches, we will be on the front lines. A kibbutz must be prepared.”

“Do you have special groups who can handle these weapons?”

“*Binoreynu U'vizkeyreynu*— young and old, all of us know how to hold a rifle.”

“How is it the government allows the populace to be armed?”

“What, do you think they are afraid of us? It's a Jewish government, and we are Jews, too... But enough. Come on, let's go eat.”

We went into the dining room. It was a long hall that could accomodate four or five hundred people. There were long tables without tablecloths, with benches around the tables. We sat down at at table. They gave us plates and utensils. Whole mountains of bread were on the table. In the middle of the table was a deep bowl, which they called “Kolboynik”<sup>2</sup>.

Everyone gets just one plate. When he is done with his salad, he cleans the plate off into the kolboynik and is ready to ready to take soup from a bowl on the table. When he is done with the soup, he puts meat on the same plate. The compote is served onto the same plate. There are no

napkins. People wipe their mouths with their hands. In a lot of kibbutzim, they hang hand towels by the door. After the meal, people wash their hands and everyone wipes their hands with the same towels, like people once did at the ritual washstand in the synagogue.

The food was simple, but tasty and nourishing. You could take second or third portions.

The secretary began showing us around the kibbutz. He pointed out their property: A wood shop, a metal shop, a bakery, stables with cows and horses, a prize bull, chicken coops, storehouses with grain reserves, children's quarters, a school, and apartments for the kibbutzniks.

"Every kibbutz strives for a diversified economy. This is an old principle of ours. We supply bread and cakes, not just to Ra'Anana but also to Netanya. During the war, we supplied bread to the army. Of course, all the profits go to the kibbutz.

p. 109

"Now we have a problem. We don't have enough workers. The new immigrants do not want to be in a kibbutz. They call the kibbutz a 'kolchoz' [a Soviet collective farm], a concentration camp, and who knows what else. So we have to hire day laborers. Hired workers are working for us. It's definitely against our principles. But what are we to do? The fields, vineyards, and orange groves cannot be neglected. The work in the cow barn and horse stables absolutely cannot be set aside. We are forced to hire workers like any kind of capitalist organization.

"And now I will show you the points we defended and the places where we dug ourselves in against the enemy. I will take you up the water tower, and you will see how hemmed in we were."

On the way to the water tower, we came to an clearing. He stopped.

"This spot has a whole history behind it. I'm sure you know that we were already well-known during the time when England ruled over us. You've probably heard how they looked for weapons among us. They drove us all together right here and searched us for weapons. One of our young men was killed during the search.

"The behavior of the English was not how we imagined an Englishman is supposed to behave. They were rude, brutal and cynical. But, nevertheless, an Englishman is not a barbarian. They looked and they looked and they could not find anything. So they wanted to tear out the floor of the dining hall. Our women, girls and children stood against them. They took pitchers, pots, and bowls of water and poured them onto the soldiers who wanted to tear up the floor. Well, it helped."

We went up on the water tower.

"The Arabs could not be driven off with Lag B'Omer rifles<sup>3</sup>. This was a decisive battle: Us or them. Look, right there on the front of that hill there was an Arab village. There was another

village to the right. The foreign enemy attacked us from behind. We were trapped as if in a vise. Just as the war began, we went out to the two Arab villages, and warned them...

p.110

that we would blow them up if they fought against us. One village was afraid and withdrew. The second village stayed and fought. Stayed until now. So, on one side we have enough land, and on the other side we are cut off from the land.

“We sent our children away. It was truly hell here. The fire came from two sides. We had to hold the kibbutz. It would have opened the road to Ra’Anana and Tel-Aviv. And how do you give up a kibbutz? Just leave it behind – life would have lost its meaning.”

“Losses?”

He sighed.

“It’s hard to convey the tragedy. Lets not talk about it. Even the fallen animals still tear at our hearts. An animal is not just a dumb creature to us. Every cow is raised here and has a name like a child.”

I asked him to show me the school. I wanted to see the building. He led me there.

The school was surrounded by trees. It had a large veranda, and the rooms were well lit, spacious and well furnished. A long room had wall newspapers and children’s compositions displayed on the walls.

I began to examine the children’s work. All the compositions were about the war. This was no surprise to me. The children had just returned to the kibbutz two months ago. Every child was preoccupied with the bloody events. The true character of the education could only be apprehended from an exhibit that did not have to do with the war at all, and from the work the graduating children presented.

The exhibit that took up the most space had been prepared by the whole graduating class. They had taken up two whole sides of the room. A long bench stretched over the length of the two walls. On it, the children had presented a clay model of the development of humanity from the cavemen to the present day. Civilized man stood on the Land of Israel. A magnificent map of Israel...

p. 111

and the surrounding environment had been sculpted out of clay, cement, and stones. Every bit of land that Jews had ever ruled was indicated with a special little stone. A large sign above read: “Moledatonu” – Our Homeland.

The big projects about the prophets were extraordinarily interesting. Considering that they were written by fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys and girls, the work was very thorough. But they emphasized every place in the prophets that called for vengeance, that extolled war, victory, and national pride, and that gave promises of national glory.

We left the schoolroom. On the veranda, a middle-aged man sat, banging on a typewriter. A fourteen-year-old girl read a manuscript to him out loud, and he typed it out on the typewriter.

The secretary introduced him to me:

“This is our chronicler. We are keeping a chronicle like the Jewish communities of old used to do. Every week, everything that happens is accurately recorded. Now, because of the war, a lot of work has accumulated. Besides recording every detail of the battles, there are also biographies of the fallen, which will then be published anonymously in the press. He works on the chronicle three days a week.”

“And the other three days?” I asked.

“On the other three days he works at his trade,” my guide answered. “He is the kibbutz shoemaker.”

Later I browsed through the volumes of the chronicle. Everything was recorded systematically and clearly. Certain events and biographies were written with real talent and in a very fine Hebrew.

We went in to the secretary’s apartment. It was one room, ten feet wide by fifteen feet long. There was a bed, a desk, two chairs, a radio, a pair of portraits on the wall, two dozen books, and a dresser. We sat on the bed. He took a clay pitcher of water from a drawer and offered me a drink. We talked:

p. 112

“What do I have from twenty years of work? What do you mean? I have everything I need. Each of us has a room – newcomers in not especially good houses, and the old inhabitants in good houses. I am a widower, so I have a smaller room. Married couples have bigger rooms, where two beds can easily fit.

“Do you think one room is too little? Why? Our children sleep in separate quarters, in the children’s house. As for food, we eat in the common dining hall. The library is open to us at all times. We can have guests wherever in the kibbutz we want. So why do we need more than one room?

“What kind of clothes do we have? Here, look: There are plenty of work shirts in the dresser, along with two white shirts, a tie, underwear, four pair of work pants, and a suit with a pair of shoes for Shabbes. If our clothes tear, we get new ones.



“Newspapers? All the newspapers are in the library. Any pair of people who want the same paper have a right to order whatever they want, and get one paper privately for the two of them. If someone wants to read more than one paper, he can easily manage it. People swap. Of course, in our kibbutz, most people are members of either Mapam or Mapai. But there are other parties, too. We have no orthodox members, because we don't keep a kosher kitchen.

“Books? Each member has the right to order however many books a year are allowed, based on the book budget. But the library is large. If someone has to have a book, the library will get it for him.

“How do we raise our children? I would like you to understand: We are not interested in raising a generation of intellectuals who will run away from the kibbutz. We give every child a high school education, but the general studies go hand in hand with work. A child must do his share in the field, in the kitchen or in the factory, according to his age. We raise the specialists we need, but we see to it that the next generation stays here with us – not like the Jewish colonies in Argentina did, and not like the Jewish workers have done among you in America.

p. 113

“Talented children? If a child displays special talents, we see to it that he proceeds with his studies. Once, that was hard for us. Now, the kibbutz can allow itself such things. We even send children to study abroad.

“Yes, very often parents complain and make demands: We have not appropriately evaluated their child. But we straighten it out. Of course, there are sometimes resentments.

“Yes, it sometimes happens that someone does not do his day's work properly. Well, a person is not a machine. If it becomes chronic, we try to find out why. Typically, in such cases there is always a reason. Often someone will need to change occupations. He is taken out of the field and put to work in the stables, or somewhere else.

“Travel to the city? If someone has to go into the city, he gets expenses. No one is permitted private capital. Everyone must give everything he has to the kibbutz treasury. There have been cases when a member has put hundreds and thousands of pounds into the treasury. This did not give him greater status. No one may have special privileges.

“Old parents of members are taken care of. Once, when we were young, this was not a problem. Now there are a fair number of old mothers and fathers. Luckily for us, the kibbutz is rich enough now, and can afford it. There are kibbutzim that have special kosher kitchens for the old people. They are also provided with a shul with a Torah scroll. Yes, needy relatives are frequently supported.

“New members? Yes, that's a real problem. The new immigrants are not idealists. Besides that, they lived an imposed communal life for too long. Up to now there was an inviolable law not to

hire any workers for wages. But now after the war's destruction we have been forced to employ outside workers. We now employ nearly thirty workers from the outside.

"Our members who work in our factory are not paid any more. Put more accurately, a person does not get any extra reward no matter what expertise he has."

"You will pardon me," I interjected. "I see..."

p. 114

a very nice bicycle in the corner. Since no one gets any extra pay, how did you get the bicycle? And right here that is a really expensive radio."

"The kibbutz bought the radio," he answered. "Last year the kibbutz bought each of us a radio. But don't remind me about the bicycle. You know, our customs allow us to receive presents. Well, a year ago my sister came here, and brought this bicycle for my boy as a bar-mitzvah present, even though I don't believe in bar-mitzvahs. So we were left with the question of whether it is right for him to use it. None of the other children here has a bicycle. Why should he be privileged? Yes, he uses it once in a while. He is, after all, a child. But I don't like the idea. I think, though, that in a year from now we will manage to buy every boy and girl a bicycle when they reach a certain age."

It had gotten late. I got up and took my leave. I apologized for all my pressing questions and for taking so much of his time.

"On the contrary," he answered me. "It's been a pleasure for me to meet you. We want these kind of probing questions. We are happy when a guest comes and wants to know everything. We have nothing to hide. You know everyone wants to brag about what he has. Our kibbutz is our own prized possession, and we believe we have something to brag about."

I agreed. This was my first acquaintance with a kibbutz.

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Two days later I went to visit another kibbutz that was also not far from Ra'Anana. To get there by taxi would have been too much of a luxury, so I went by bus. I set out early, because with waiting and changes the trip would require over three hours.

I went there with my wife, daughter and brother. As soon as I arrived at the kibbutz I went into the secretary's office and introduced myself. The first thing he said was:

"Well, you probably have not eaten breakfast. Come to the dining room and have something to take the edge off your hunger. Lunch is not until one o'clock."

p. 115

“Thank you,” I answered. “But before we go to eat something, I would like to see if you also have an arsenal. You see, I saw a whole room full of weapons in Kibbutz R-H. I would like to know, is their kibbutz an exception?”

“What kind of an exception? All kibbutzim still keep weapons. Here, see: You should know we stand guard every night.”

He unlocked a room and showed me the weapons, and started to explain each kind of rifle. I nodded my head as though I understood something about the subject.

We went to the dining room. A thought needled me: *Here I am asking about weapons and it does not occur to anyone to ask me: “Who are you? Where do you come from? Let me see your passport.” My being Jewish is enough to certify that I belong to Israel.*

Why did not sit in the dining room for long. We were given tea and bread with *riba* (jam). In two hours, they would be serving lunch. The secretary offered to accompany us and show us the kibbutz. I declined: “We want to walk around by ourselves and look at everything.” He did not argue with us. “By all means, go and look at whatever you want. But do not forget to visit our *beyt-habra ’ah* (sanitarium), our hotel for getting well” (his words).

The kibbutz had a mixed economy, like all other kibbutzim. They had several industrial operations along with the usual farm: fields, vegetable gardens, cows, chicken coops, orchards and vineyards. My wife and my bother stayed behind and sat in a lovely park near the beach, while my daughter and I slithered into a field. We met a group of young men working. I greeted them. I began asking them questions: “Who are they? How did they come here? What are they doing? Are they kibbutzniks?”

A young man began answering me in Hebrew. His Hebrew was halting. He asked:

“Does your daughter speak Hebrew?”

“Quite poorly,” I answered.

“And Yiddish?”

p. 116

“Yes.”

“Then let's speak Yiddish. You see, I have only been in the country for a year and a half. When I'm working, I speak Yiddish. After work, when I relax, I speak Hebrew.

“Who are they? They are people from the Youth Aliyah—young people from Europe: from the concentration camps, from the refugee camps, from Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, and who knows where else.

“How did they come here? They were brought here. Haven’t you heard about the Youth Aliyah? The government, or an agent of the government pays the kibbutz four of five pounds a month for them (a little over twelve dollars). For that they are given food, a good place to sleep, clothes, entertainment and an intensive education. The work half the day, and learn half the day.

“They are a group of fifty under one *madrish* (a guide, an educator, a leader). There are three such groups here on the kibbutz. Every kibbutz in the country has from one to two hundred of these young people.

“Is twelve dollars a month very little to support a young person? Of course. But this is a community service of the kibbutz. Surely it costs the kibbutz a good many pounds a month. But because of it, they are educating new kibbutzniks. A group such as this is called a *garin* – a kernel of a new kibbutz.

“No, not everyone adapts. If half a group remains, it's a truly good *garin*. Sometimes only a few remain. But those few are tested and loyal comrades of the party, good material for a new kibbutz.

“Yes there are also hundreds of other young people from the Youth Aliyah. They are children from fourteen through eighteen years old, who attend high schools, or have graduated from public [primary] school. They come to work for four weeks. For them is a kind of vacation work-month. These youngsters are under the supervision of special *madrachim*, appointed by the kibbutz. But so what! Those are children from well-off families. They eat more than they work.

“Are you staying overnight? No? That’s a shame! We would love to tell you all about it. You are going on a longer visit in the Jezereel Valley? Good, you will be able to see our group there.”

At twelve o’clock, they put away their work and went to eat. I met quite a few of them. I sat at their tables with them...

p. 117

for a good long time and chatted. The usual life stories, that you hear from rescued Jews everywhere, horror stories, so horrifying that you cannot take them in.

What sticks in my memory is how noisy they were at the meal, their natural demeanor, their feeling that they are at home and have overcome all their woes, and the mixture of Hebrew and Yiddish in their speech, often with other languages as well.

After the meal we went to visit the hotel. Right on the ocean shore, among pine trees, there stood a fine two-story building with a sign: "Sanitarium". Around the house were tidy one-story houses – bungalows with all the modern furnishings.

It was the post-lunch hour. Near a thick little patch of woods, dozens of guests lay stretched out on beach chairs, resting.

I went into the hotel. The director welcomed me warmly, as people did everywhere in Israel. She showed me their truly well-appointed kitchen: They had a large electric oven, fine electric refrigerators, an electric dishwasher, and all kinds of cabinets. She simply forced us to taste the fine baked torte that she had prepared for the guests, and to drink some tea.

“Yes, she directs the hotel. The kibbutz sent her to take special courses. She's also worked in the finest hotels in the county. Yes, of course it was the kibbutz that sent her there to work. The hotel brings in a good several thousand pounds a year. This is one of the kibbutz's enterprises.

“Everyone who works here is a kibbutznik. The person who gives out the work assignments, decides who will do what. Of course people comply. If someone is suited for this work and wants to stay, he stays. When there are more guests here, I say we need another this or that many dishwashers, this or that many more girls to look after the rooms, and they send them to us.”

We sat on the porch, drank tea, and talked with her. There was a flower garden right next to the steps. The garden was paved with colored asphalt and lovely eight-sided figures. In the middle stood a fountain that watered the flowers.

A middle-aged woman stood there, washing the pavement with soap. I quietly asked the director:

p. 118

“Who is she?”

“What do you mean, who is she? A kibbutznik. One of the first, of the founders.”

“Is this a job for one of the oldest kibbutzniks?”

The director laughed out loud and turned to the woman. “Do you hear what he said, Shifra? Why is it worth all that effort for you to clean the asphalt?”

Shifra rested her chin on the handle of her soapy rag mop, took a look at me, and said:

“If you had come here as I did twenty years ago, and dried the marsh, carrying sand on your shoulders, filling the holes, planting trees, and lying in bed with malarial fever; you would not talk that way about any of the work in the kibbutz.”

She sighed and gestured with her hand:

“Oh, I still remember the meeting when we discussed putting in the hotel. Do you think the first house looked like the little palace we have now? And I (here she suddenly switched to Hebrew) expressly wanted a fountain in the middle of a flower garden, a garden with a variety of flowers and colored asphalt around it. So, whose colored pavement am I cleaning?”

“Do you live here in the hotel?” I asked her.

“Who wants to live here? Don’t I have a home and a husband? My room is just as big and as beautiful as anyone’s in the kibbutz. I am one of the veterans here, one of the old ones. We even have radios in our homes, everyone in their own home.”

Someone came to tell me that the last bus was leaving the kibbutz in fifteen minutes. We returned to Ra’Anana late in the evening.

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1. Based on Simon's description of the kibbutz and on its location, its history, and the initials R-H (supplied later in the text), this is Kibbutz Ramat HaKovesh.

2. Jack of all trades. Also, a rascal.

3. Lag B’Omer is a minor, and festive, Jewish holiday. Traditionally, children play with toy bows and arrows and, by the time of this writing, other toy weapons as well.



Solomon and Lena Simon at an airfield, c. 1949.  
Photos not otherwise credited were taken by the author's daughter Miriam Simon.



Jaffa.



In an Immigrant Transit Camp



Be'er Sheva





Mea Shearim



Herzl's coffin and honor guard. Tel Aviv, August 16, 1949. Source: "National Photo Collection" retrieved at <https://gpophotoeng.gov.il/fotoweb/Grid.fwx?search=D743-057.jpg#Preview1>



Ramat Hakovesh. Photo from Wikipedia commons.



A shepherd at Kibbutz Afikim. Source: Wikipedia Commons אפיקים - העדר של אפיקים במרעה  
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Kibbutz Chofets Chaim



## Chapter 12: In the Jezreel Valley

I left my family in Haifa and set off alone to visit kibbutzim in the valley. It is rarely possible to take a bus from Haifa directly to the kibbutzim of the Jezreel Valley. I had to change buses in Afula.

Afula is a small town. Its businesses are located around the bus station. I had to wait a couple of hours there for a bus. I bought all the newspapers at a kiosk. A shoeshine boy, ten years old, was sitting between the little newspaper stall and a store window. I asked him if he shined shoes – a dumb question, but I wanted to start a conversation with him. He indicated with his hand that he did not understand Hebrew. I tried Yiddish. He did not understand. I began talking in English, and he answered with one word: “Hindi.”

The storekeeper came out, saw that I was wearing myself out trying to speak to the boy. He said to me:

“Your talking to him is useless. He comes from India. The whole family is here in an immigrant camp. He came to me two weeks ago, the poor little soul. I do not know how he managed to communicate with me. He has to support his mother, his sick sister and two little brothers. I thought he was trying to swindle me, so I got up and went over...

p. 120

to the immigrant camp. It's actually true. Why were they brought here? I don't have the faintest clue. Maybe they had designs on the children. So I let him shine shoes next to my store. The urchin makes his fifteen or sixteen piasters a day.”

The boy looked right at the storekeeper's mouth, as though he could understand his Yiddish, and smiled at him gratefully. As he shined my shoes, I talked with the storekeeper.

“You're going to see the kibbutzim. Go, and see with your own eyes. You will see a group of scoundrels, lazybones, men with no ambition, fanatics who are always going on and on about *matspan* – conscience. You will see people who are content to live in one room, and to abandon their children to children's homes, seeing them only a couple of hours a day, as long as they are taken care of in their old age. They are cattle! They want to be provided with everything and not to have to worry about tomorrow. You will see a meal, everyone in one room like in a poorhouse. No Shabbes there, no holidays. What a life!

“They have no future. All the kibbutzim were created by long-haired bachelors, their shirts tied with knitted belts with tassels at the ends. They wanted to bring the Messiah via Karl Marx. They do not believe in business or in the large manufacturers that can build a country. The new immigrants do not even want to look at the kibbutzim. Our young people are continually being brow-beaten: “Kibbutz! Kibbutz!” Everywhere: In the public schools, in the Mizrakhi schools, and absolutely in the agricultural schools of the Histadrut. But it doesn't stick. They are taken to a kibbutz for three or four weeks every summer, and still very few young people become kibbutzniks.

Who wants to work like a slave and after twenty years, if you want to leave the kibbutz, they give you a two pound note and a pair of shirts, and – "Go!"? The future of the country rests in private enterprise, a little bit in the moshavs (cooperative villages), and mostly in the hands of individual farmers."

I did not answer him. I just wanted to listen, not to argue with him. This was not the first time that I...

p. 121

heard an unfavorable opinion about the kibbutzim from a city person. But it was the first time I heard such a painfully sharp one.

Before the bus came, I still had time to have a conversation with the owner of the soda shop right next to the fenced-off area where people have to wait on line.

"How did I get such a good spot for my soda shop? No one gives you anything for free. I have been here for twelve years, and I have done my share. I am missing three ribs, and my left leg is shorter than my right. Been in my share of battles.

"I've worked chopping stones, laying roads, and in construction. I wore myself out. Now, thank God, I have begun to recover. My two boys go to school. The younger one is a truly good learner. I will make a *pokid* (a government worker) out of him. The older one will have to learn a trade. I want to send him to the Max Fein Vocational School. He will become a mechanic, and a person who masters a trade will not be at a loss."

The bus arrived. We rode for just fifteen minutes, and the driver left me off at an unpaved road. He directed me to go straight on the road and I would arrive in M-H. A young man, twenty-two years old, got off with me. Yes, he was going to the kibbutz, too.

We walked between vegetable gardens and cucumber fields. I saw the road veered in between rows of trees in the distance—a decent bit of woods. To the left was wasteland and Mount Tabor.

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Throughout the whole time I was in the Land of Israel, I would never remain tranquil when I came to a historic place. Passages and verses would start to jumble in my head, and they would bring figures and events up into my thoughts. Here, too: Mount Tabor is where Deborah the prophetess sat and judged the people. Here, at the foot of the mountain, an army mustered against Cicero. Not far...

p. 122

from there is Ein Dor, where Saul went to ask the witch to foresee the outcome in the coming battle.

It was quiet. The sun shone brightly and the air was clear. It seemed like you could reach out with your hand and touch that bare, barren mountain. It was a bright stillness, and it felt to me as though the echoes of Cicero's army, and the reverberations from the ten thousand warriors of the tribes of Naftali and Zebulun, led by Barak, still remained in that barren place. I could actually see the petrified tree, there on the mountain, beneath which Deborah sat, judging the tribes.

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My companion spoke to me. "You're going to visit the kibbutz?"

The illusion disappeared. I came back to myself and answered. "Yes."

"Do you know someone there?"

I named an acquaintance I knew there.

"Oh, he is the principal of my school. He will get a fine room for you. It's good that you, an American Jew, are traveling alone, without a guide, to get to know the kibbutzim. That is the right way to do it."

I smiled and described what the storekeeper had said about the kibbutzim. My companion dismissed it.

"Nonsense! Who cares about the babbling of a storekeeper! The kibbutzim are the backbone of the Jewish Yishuv. In the war not a single kibbutz deserted its position voluntarily. The kibbutz is so constructed, that it is not only an economic stronghold for the country, but from a military standpoint every kibbutz is in fact a strategic position. If not for the kibbutzim in the Negev and in Sharon the armies of the enemy would have flooded Israel in ten days. Negba, Yad Mordechai, and Ramat Hakovesh won the war."

p. 123

I did not say anything, and my young man grew more heated:

"Work is holy to us, and the equality of our members is the first and fundamental Mitzvah to us. The kibbutz is the owner of everything. The individual is not even the owner of his own room and the few pieces of furniture in it. It's his for as long as he lives in the kibbutz. If he leaves the kibbutz, he is given two or three pounds, and he walks away with his clothing and his couple of books.

"But you have to understand, the members do not feel as though there is a power that rules unilaterally, and is the actual owner of all the kibbutz possessions. No! It's a family. Do children feel that their house is not theirs? No, that example does not work, because children are sometimes mistreated by their parents. Better to compare the ownership of a kibbutz with the ownership of husband and wife. In a good life no one thinks about what will happen if one of them leaves the family.

“Look, there are kibbutzim with a thousand people and more. Yet there is no police there. They do not lock their doors at night. Now we have a night watchman around the kibbutz, but not in the kibbutz.

“The reason there are no police is that there has been no stealing, no violence, and absolutely no murder. Fighting, yes. Fistfights? Anyone who raises a hand against a comrade must leave the kibbutz.

“You have probably read enough books about the kibbutz. But in order to understand the relationship of a kibbutznik to his kibbutz, in order to grasp the absolute equality of the people, in order to understand our child rearing, you have to see it with your own eyes. You know the saying: Hearing is not like seeing. When you see with your own eyes, then you will believe what you have read and what you have heard.”

I wanted to ask him about himself, but we had arrived at the kibbutz, and he led me in to the secretary. I told the secretary that I had come to see Sholem. He called someone in and told him to find my friend for me.

p. 124

I received a wonderful welcome from Sholem, first because of the greeting I brought to him from his aunt and uncle, and second because he is a reader of mine.

Sholem comes from a good family. His father was among the most honored Jewish scholars, a leader of the Jewish Scientific Institute [Yivo] in Vilna. He died as a martyr in the war. His son was raised on Yiddish literature. He still reminded me of Vilna. I was happy to be with my first reader in Israel, even if a former one.

I asked about his wife. He answered, “She works in the laundry. The machine broke in the afternoon, so she will be working late, until eight thirty. We will be eating dinner late. Come to the dining room now, and we’ll have a glass of tea and a piece of bread with jam.”

I tried to refuse. He would not let me.

“I’m hungry, too. We still have a half hour before I will be able to see my daughter. Come!”

After our snack he went in to his room and got a bag of hard candies, and we went to see his child. He spent two hours with the child. After we parted with his child, there was still over an hour left until Sholem’s wife would be freed from the laundry. We walked past the large building and a short, thin young woman ran out and gave me her hand, which was wet and soapy. She apologized for not being ready until eight thirty. If we were hungry we should not wait for her. Then she ran back in. She could not leave the machine unattended.

Apparently, Sholem noticed that her exhausted, sweaty face and her fatigue, which was evident in her every movement, had not made a good impression on me. He said:

“Today was very hot, and then on top of that the machine broke, so she had to work longer. It’s very hard on her.”

We waited for her to eat. She sat with us at the table, but she ate very little. She was very tired. After the meal, she did not sit with us for long. When Sholem talked, she was quiet.

p. 125

...She could barely keep her eyes open. After sitting for a while, she excused herself. “Sholem will show you the kibbutz. I have to lie down to sleep.”

Later, he brought me to my room – a very comfortable room. We sat and chatted about a lot of things. He told me how he had come to the kibbutz. How it had taken a good bit of time until he adapted to that life. Then, how they had decided, against his will, that he should become a teacher. He told me about taking classes in the city, traveling home every week, and finally the war. He was what would have been called a first lieutenant in America, and he went through all the sufferings of the war.

He told me a lot of episodes from the war. What stuck with me was one short episode, which he described almost coincidentally, offhand, as one would tell an unimportant occurrence:

“We were lying in our position and exchanging fire. The enemy opened fire with a terrible hail of bullets. I lost six men in only a few minutes. By all the laws of strategy, we ought to have retreated. The responsibility of deciding what to do fell on me. I am afraid that, in that moment, I did not think about the fate of the Jewish people. It did not even occur to me that if we retreated we would open the road to Sharon to the enemy. I saw only one thing: If we retreated, they would have a clear path to take the kibbutz. They would go in and burn down the dining hall, the stables, and the children’s houses. They would destroy the machines, take the cows and the sheep, and we would have to go off. Maybe we would find a home somewhere, but what kind of life would it be without the kibbutz? No, retreating was not worth it. Better not to live to see such a time. We did not retreat.”

I spent several days at that kibbutz. It wasn't one of the richest kibbutzim, but it was one of the extreme Mapam [left wing] kibbutzim, and I had a great many questions I wanted to ask. Primarily, I wanted to know about how they raise and educate their children. There was good cause to ask.

p. 126

On the first day I was at the kibbutz, I witnessed the couple of hours when the parents come to see their children after work. Work usually ends around four thirty. The first parents begin to see their children around five o'clock. I went off to the playground with Sholem.

The playground is right next to the children’s homes. It’s like a little park. The grass is mowed and there are trees ringing the whole space. The playground is equipped extraordinarily well: Swings, see-saws, a May pole, slides, and everything children ought to have for play.



Sholem was the first one there. His child ran to him with such joy and such force that she almost burst out crying. Sholem took the delightful girl in his arms, rocked her, and covered her with kisses. Soon more mothers and fathers arrived, each of them with something in their hands. The parents were so hungry for their children, that all of them gave in to their child's every whim. And the children, who spent their whole day under the watch of trained caregivers, strangers, hired people, yearned for a stroke, a kiss and the indulgence of their parents. The children whined and the parents comforted them.

I saw painful scenes. Everyone stuffed their children's mouths with candies, and it was only a very short time before supper. Children dragged their parents from one place to another. A three-year-old boy hit his mother with sadistic pleasure. The longer I sat there, the clearer it became that it was not a good arrangement. By the time the two hours were almost up, the parents and children were exhausted and restless. Several young children had actually become hysterical, and a lot of the older children sat resentful, angry or indifferent, bored with the time-limited affection.

I sat and took in all these scenes. I wondered how the kibbutzim were not raising nervous, helpless children. Whatever you might say about the sabras, nervous and helpless they are certainly not. *Why not?* I wondered that late afternoon.

p. 127

The next day I spent a whole day in the children's houses. A lot of things about young people in Israel became clear to me.

The Children's Houses are extraordinarily comfortable and well furnished. The children do all the necessary work in their rooms and around their apartment, to the extent that it is physically possible for them. Children wash their own floors, of course, and they clean and make their beds. They see to it that the children take care of themselves from a very young age. One trivial detail will illuminate this more, perhaps, than the most long-winded description. The three-year-old children have their own showers. The faucets have been installed at a height where the child can turn the water on and off himself.

Children only play in groups. I witnessed a scene where a three-year-old girl already had a feeling of group responsibility. The *metapelet* (caregiver) led eight three-year-old children to the playground. They walked, dressed only in pajamas. A girl fell hard and banged herself. She began to cry miserably. The caregiver stopped the group and quickly turned to see whether the girl was bleeding. She felt her to make sure no bone was broken. There was no danger. She said to the child, calmly, "Stand up, Ilona. It's nothing!"

The girl cried loudly. The caregiver said calmly and quietly, "There is no blood. Stand up and come."

The child did not stop crying and would not move from the spot. The caregiver spoke more sternly. "Ilona, you are holding up your class. They are all waiting for you."

Ilona got up, rubbed her eyes on her pajamas and went off to the group.

From a very young age, the children have already become accustomed to a communal life. Upon reaching school age, each class has its room in the children's home. They live together in the same room for all eight years that they learn in public school. When they enter high school, the whole...

p. 128

class is again given a separate room. And so the whole class of twenty boys and girls lives together for twelve years.

In the extreme kibbutz I was now visiting, the girls and boys slept in the same room until they were eighteen years old. In other kibbutzim, they sleep in the same room until the age of twelve. When I asked the caregiver, whether there wasn't any immoral activity, when young people of that age slept together, she answered me:

"Not only do they sleep in the same room, they also take a *miklachat*, a shower, together. No, we still have not had any such unpleasant case here. But we are going to abolish the common dormitories for boys and girls over twelve years old. The reason is a different one altogether. The boys and girls here rarely fall in love. They look at each other as brothers and sisters. So, we have managed to make very few matches among our own young people. That will not do. They marry outside kibbutzniks and leave our kibbutz."

I sat with the caregiver on the steps of the porch and spoke with her. Suddenly I heard a commotion, with a machine banging and strange cries, coming from behind a row of trees. I jumped up in fright. She stayed sitting calmly and said, "That is an instructor out with a group that's on a tractor for the first time."

I went off to watch what was going on there. Behind the trees, on the edge of a plowed field, there was a red tractor. About fourteen or fifteen boys were gathered around it and on it. A middle-aged man, who looked like anything you like – a Russian, an Englishman, a Scandinavian – but not like a Jew, stood in the middle of them, holding his hands over both ears. They were arguing about something having to do with the parts of the machine. Since I did not know the terminology, I did not understand a word of they were talking about.

Finally, the man gave a yell. "*Sheket!* (Quiet)"

p. 129

When they had quieted down, he said calmly, "Chaim is correct."

I stood off to one side and was only barely able to understand what the dispute was about. The group was not just learning how to operate the tractor, but also to understand the machinery. The instructor was the authority who resolved all differences of opinion.

Before I knew it, the group had found me and was peppering me with questions about American young people. The main question was, do the Jewish youth in America know about the war, which we just went through with seven countries? Are young Americans preparing to come to Israel? Is it true that there are quotas in American schools? Is it true that American Jews are afraid to read Jewish newspapers in the subway? What are the Jews in America waiting for, and why aren't they leaving? A blind man can see that their fate will be the same as the fate of the Jews in Germany.

The instructor did not participate in the conversation. When I was left alone with him, he lit up a smoke and smiled:

"You see how it is with these kids? Well, they are not very well oriented to how it is in America. I was just there a year ago. I travel to you often. The party sends me, and I know the situation. Well, the guys have what you might call the Zionist perspective, which is oriented towards anti-Semitism. But, they are going to be kibbutzniks!"

He kissed the tip of his fingers.

The main industrial enterprise of this kibbutz is a large print house, which prints all of the party publications. I visited the printer. The workshop was equipped with the best printing machinery, most of it sent from America as gifts from members of the party. I was witness to a bad scene. A worker took a printed page spread off the press and, smiling, showed it to a young man who was sitting in the corner. I looked at the young man and recognized him as the one who had gotten off the bus with me the day before.

p. 130

He quickly skimmed the printed sheet and called out angrily. "That should not have been allowed to be printed! It's not time to write these things yet! It's a scandal!"

The typesetter, or pressman, taunted him. "It went through the editorial board."

"If I had known," answered the young man, "I would have protested, and I would have found a way for the press to refuse to publish it."

I went up to the young man and greeted him. I asked him to show me the printed sheet. He gave it to me and said:

"Take it. Read. Be my guest. You are a writer and a man of the community. Read it and tell me. Should this be allowed to be published now?"

I read the two pages in question. It was a description of some really ugly things that Jewish soldiers had done. What made the writer angriest was that there were a lot of 'Mapamniks' among the soldiers. They were not better than the others.

I said to the young man:

“I think that you are wrong. One may write such things and, of all times, just now. It’s no great feat to publish such things years afterwards. You know that in times of peace it’s easy to be a pacifist. All "upstanding" people protest against the sins of the past. But the truly honest man calls out when the sin is being committed.”

He waved me off.

“Tonight we will meet and talk about it at length. In the meantime, do you want to see the kibbutz?”

“I like going around alone,” I answered, “but I would like you to take me to some of your friends in their rooms. I want to see where they live. I want to see if you really do have equality.”

He led me around. No one occupied more than one room. Those who had been there longest lived in better houses, but none of the rooms had an individual toilet or...

p.131

bathroom. The bathrooms were in the hall, in common space. Finally, he led me into a room, not one of the best ones, and remarked offhandedly:

“This room is Sh...’s, the Member of the Knesset [Parliament]. When the Mapai gives in to our demands and we have a coalition government with them, he will be our [Prime] Minister. But we will not give him a better room. He has only been in the kibbutz for ten years. These rooms are for the group with his seniority.

That night I sat with a number of active kibbutz members and we passed the time until nearly dawn. The cream of the kibbutz came to me. People sat on the bed, on chairs, on the floor, and on the sills of the open windows. I told them about America. An interesting conversation ensued. Afterwards, I began asking questions about the kibbutz. The first question was about the incident at the printer. It was not, however, the young man who answered me, but Sholem:

“This is not the time to talk about that. We did not want the war. The Mapam was completely opposed to a partition from the beginning. And we absolutely did not want to kick the Arabs off the land. But do you know what it means to lie in trenches for weeks and months, to be so tired that even breathing is strenuous work? You lie there, holding an old rifle, knowing that you could be cut into pieces any minute, cut up simply as that. You ought to have seen the bodies of our soldiers who fell into their hands. In such circumstances can you talk about *matspan* (conscience) and compassion, and following ethical rules? Oh, a lot of our boys paid them back with their own coin. Can you blame them?

But I did not let them off:

“That is, in fact, my complaint. Statehood has its logic. If you came here to occupy a country for yourselves, you could not have expected peaceful acquiescence from the existing populace. You must have expected that you would have to wage a war.

p. 132

“That’s true, in fact,” answered the young man, “our mistake was a much greater one. We did not create a Mapam movement among the Arabs. We were ready to make any compromise, but the Arabs did not want a compromise. Especially when the rich effendis exerted their influence, and then the international schemers did their part, too. Let them say that we were literally no better than the extremists. The only case of atrocities from our guys was no more than a result of that confusion.”

“No,” said another kibbutznik. “Self-criticism should cut to the quick. It’s good for the book to be printed. I am not proud of what we have done. There’s nothing to be proud of. Let there be a feeling of guilt. It’s healthier that way.”

After that matter, I brought up another question.

“Is the fundamental basis of your kibbutz materialistic, or ethical?”

Sholem shrugged.

“Begging your pardon, but that is just hairsplitting. As long as we have established equality in a just society.”

I tried to clarify my thought.

“Here in the kibbutz you have founded a very new kind of society. If there will ever be a socialist society in the world, or as I would call it, an ethical society, it will be according to your example. You have equality without the whip. You in the kibbutz are a kind of model society. You could influence the world. You live modestly, each of you only in one room, with the children in common rooms. Men, women, and teenagers all work. There are no freeloaders among you. You have altered family life, and you have minimized poverty. You have full democracy, both political and economic, and I repeat, without coercion. Moreover, every one of you bears social responsibility. You spend the capital you have saved, due to your low standard of living, on three things: a very small portion on...

p. 133

small luxuries for the members, a large portion on bettering the kibbutz, and a very large portion for the good of the whole [nation]. One example: Your poor kibbutz supports over two-hundred children from the Youth Aliyah—immigrant children. And two hundred children a summer come to you from nuer-oved, which I suspect that you also have to lay out money for. So, imagine there is no more Youth Aliyah. The empty land is settled. There is no longer an economic need to keep the children in common dormitories in children’s houses. The mothers do not have to work as much as the fathers. Will you maintain the communalism of the kibbutz? No, it seems to me.”

“But,” I continued, “if the basis of the kibbutz is an ethical one, where ‘people are not allowed to live in too much luxury, children must live in homes rather than with their parents, everyone must work for his bread,’ then the kibbutz would stay the way it is now. Of course it would change with the times. In other words, Jewish ethics say, *Live in such-and-such a way in order to lead a holy life, because human beings are holy*. The materialist Torah teaches, *Live in such-and-such a way, in order for the future to be comfortable*”.

The young man I had met in the bus smiled.

“You are a Jew who loves to split hairs, but there is a lot of truth in what you are saying. Still, your pilpul is a matter for the distant future. For the next fifty years, there’s no reason to have any fear. The Negev and the Galilee are unsettled wilderness and cannot be built up with private capital, or even by cooperative Moshavs. The country must have kibbutzim, a lot of kibbutzim. So, without theoretical hairsplitting, we need to raise a generation that will want to live the ascetic life of a kibbutz, and in particular the difficult life of a young kibbutz.”

We talked about many other things. I cannot relate all of them here. But one opinion, even though it had to do with me personally, is worth recording.

I visited the library. I examined the children’s library very thoroughly. I was struck by three series of books translated from English: *Dr. Doolittle*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Adventures of Tarzan*.

p. 134

I complained to them.

“These three series are very cheap books, books with practically no literary value, particularly the series about Tarzan. And yet you have eleven volumes of precisely that series, and five copies of each volume. How can this be?

And here a man sitting on the open windowsill answered me:

“The Tarzan books are right for us. They have adventure stories, fighting, battles and personal courage. Now we have to plant such character traits in our children. For us, this is an era of fighting. You know, Dr. Simon, I did not want to say it to you, but I am very well acquainted with your children’s books. I am an official librarian for the children’s section. I want to compliment you (and here he began praising me to the skies). There were recommendations from America that we translate your books, but we are not going to translate them. Your Goles-Yidn<sup>1</sup> are too much the fine Jews for us. Not only is your “Shmerl the Fool<sup>2</sup>” not a fool to you, but even your “Heroes of Chelm” are no idiots. You don’t laugh at them, you idealize them. For you, they are dear, clever, upright, and deeply honest people. We do not want our children to view Goles-Yidn this way now. Now we want to denigrate the Exile. We print Mendele, who makes fun of the Jews. We print a lot of Sh. Ben-Zion, who hated the shtetl. Thirty or forty years from now we will translate your books. Now, it is too soon.

Again, we passed the time together until the wee hours of the morning. We went to the dining room and ate breakfast. Then I went off to sleep. The kibbutzniks went to work.

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1. Goles-Yidn. "Exile-Jews", a Zionist term for Jews of the diaspora.

2. Shmerl the Fool. The protagonist of of Simon's popular children's book *Shmerl Nar* (English translation: *The Wandering Beggar*), was Shmerl the Fool in Yiddish, or Simple Shmerel in the English. *Di heldn fun khelm* (The Heroes of Chelm) appeared in English as *The Wise Men of Helm and their Merry Tales*.

## Chapter 13: Mount Gilboa

Not far from M-H, at the foot of Mount Gilboa, are two kibbutzim. They are not among the extreme kibbutzim. I told Sholem I very much wanted to spend two days there. He said to me:

“The poet G. is there, and the fiction writer Sh. I will give you a letter to them and tell them that you are a Yiddish writer and editor. They will treat you as an honored guest.”

“I do not want to be an official visitor,” I replied.

“So, then just go on in to the secretary and tell him that you want to stay in the kibbutz for a couple of days.”

“I don’t like that either. Who wants to impose on people and be a freeloader?”

Then Sholem remembered that they have a special hotel for tourists there. I left the kibbutz with my suitcase and went to the main road where I had to wait for the bus. A soldier with a wounded leg sat on the grass, also waiting for the bus. I sat down next to him.

In Israel, it does not take long for people to meet and start talking to each other. When he found out that I am an American, he began to tell me about the war. He told me a lot of things,..

p. 136

most of which was repetition of what I had already heard. But one episode, which he told me almost in passing, demonstrated to me that some of the Israeli soldiers are different than the others, after all. He spoke to me in a good literary Yiddish:

“We were in position defending Jerusalem. Our rifles were old and we had very little ammunition. Artillery shells rained down from the other side. The Arab Legion had the newest weapons, and we were standing there with rifles from the stone age. We were in dire straits. The orders we had were strict: Do not shoot unless you have to. Every bullet must have a purpose! It was not easy to follow these orders. But we followed them, because we knew that if we shot without a target we would not have any bullets when we needed them.

“All of a sudden one evening, the news arrived: New rifles had come, along with enough ammunition. We took the rifles right off the trucks and tore the wrapping off of them ourselves. The rifles were well oiled and ready to fire. And the bullets? Whole crates full of them. I grabbed my rifle and hugged it to my chest, the way a man would embrace his bride.

“Suddenly, I got a knot in my stomach. ‘Shmaya [his name], look what you are rejoicing over. It’s a weapon, an instrument for killing human beings!’

“But I was happy, nevertheless. I could not help it. With guns like these in our hands, we would be more likely to stay alive than with the old guns. And, I ask you, who wants to die?”



“Where do you come from?” I asked him.

“I’m from Kovno,” he answered.

The bus came. I rode for three-quarters of an hour. The driver stopped again in the middle of the road, and pointed me the way to the kibbutz. It was a tough stretch of road to walk. I arrived exhausted, overheated and hungry, and went into the dining room.

I sat at a table. No one asked me who I was. A member called over to the girl who served the...

p. 137

table and asked her for a plate, knife and fork for me. I sat and ate. I finished eating and asked someone, “Where is the hotel manager?”

A middle-aged woman arrived and introduced herself as the manager. "Yes," she had a room.

I told her that I was very tired and asked her whether she might have someone who could carry my suitcase.

“No,” she answered. “Usually the buses with tourists drive right up to the hotel, which is on the hill. It’s not worth it to have special people to carry things. But,” she said, “I will carry your suitcase.”

“What do you think,” I answered, “I will let a lady carry my valise? What would my conscience say?”

“Oh, you talk like a kibbutznik. Come, It’s really not that far.”

I confess that after a few days in a kibbutz, the hotel truly hit the spot. The lovely colorful tiled walls, the thick Turkish hand towels, and the privacy of the shower were especially appealing.

After the shower, I lay down to sleep. When I awoke, a man was waiting for me. He introduced himself: He was a painter, and the director of the kibbutz art museum. It is worth seeing, he said. He was especially happy that I’d come. He knew me. He had my book, *Kinder Yorn fun Yidishe Shrayber*. Might I like to see the museum now?

I excused myself. Just then I wanted to get my fill of Mount Gilboa. In the evening, I wanted to see the kibbutz on my own. I could spend the next day with him.

When he was gone, the hotel director told me that this man is in fact a famous painter. He is an old kibbutznik and began to paint here. The first years on his own time, after...

p. 138

work. When they saw that he was actually talented, they began freeing up two days a week for his work, then three days. Now he occupied himself only with painting. He is also the director of the art museum. Everyone knows him as a lover of Yiddish.

“Does his wife work on the kibbutz?” I asked.

“Of course. What kind of a question is that? She is not a painter.”

Meanwhile, she asked where I wanted to eat dinner – in the dining hall, or there in the hotel?

Embarrassed, I said, “I miss having a tablecloth and a napkin.”

A young man in the corner stood up.

“See, what did I tell you? Your kibbutzim are not for civilized people.”

The manager waved her hand dismissively.

“Don’t listen to him, he is a bourgeois!”

At dinner I made the young man’s acquaintance. He had a bulldozer, and worked for the kibbutzim. He did not think highly at all of the accomplishments of the kibbutzim. He spoke even more critically of them than the storekeeper in town.

That evening, I went strolling around the kibbutz alone. I confess that I snuck around looking into the windows of a lot of *tsirifim* (barracks) and in the rooms of the veterans. I wanted to see how kibbutzniks live in their rooms. I found few people in their rooms. The ones who were there, sat and read, or passed time with a neighbor who was in visiting. Radios played. Homes like any homes.

I went up to a large well-lit *tserif*. I heard a trained speaker talking. He was speaking passionately about something. I walked over to an open window and saw a group of young people, sitting on a long bench. Opposite them, in the middle next to a table, sat a young man exhorting them.

At first, it was hard to grasp what he said, because he talked with a soft ‘l’, with the half ‘sh’ and the ‘kh’ like a...

p. 139

true Sabra. But when my ear grew accustomed to the sound of his pronunciation, I was able to get what he was saying:

“It is a hard and fast rule that if you raise a hand against another you are driven out of the kibbutz. OK, you are new here, freshly arrived, and we look the other way when you hit each other. But knives? We collected a total of eight knives from your rooms. Another hard and fast

rule in the kibbutz is no stealing. And you? Every day something goes missing from the group or from the workshops.

“I know, I know, it is hard for you to accept that you may not steal. You can just say what you want, and it will be provided to you by the kibbutz. Hitting? What for? Here, you are living a communal life. No one has more than anyone else. It is hard to get used to the idea of communalism. You come from cities where people believe that the more you pocket, the cleverer you are, that the richer someone is, the more honor he has. Here in the kibbutz, we don’t pocket anything, because no one is going to get rich or richer. Here, everyone is the same.

“I am talking to you like to grown up human beings. You are not children. A lot of you were in the war. I hope that it is the last time that I will have to talk to you like this.”

He finished, got up, and left the room. While he was talking and the group was sitting there, it had seemed to me that none of them was paying so much attention to him. But strangely, as soon as he left, a huge commotion broke out. Each one pointed a finger at the others:

“It’s your fault! You stole the straight razor today!”

“I will give you ‘stole’,” the boy answered. “I’ll shut you up with one punch in the snout”

A boy sat on a bench and pretended to be sleepy. A Yemenite girl gave him a shove so hard it almost knocked him off the bench.

“Now he’s sleeping. He cannot count to two, my brother!”

“They ought to give it to you right in the belly,” raged a boy with hair like a negro’s, “right in the belly and knock your guts out. That will make you into human beings.”

p. 140

I could not hold it in anymore and burst out laughing. Their readiness to curse at and hit each other, because they were not allowed to curse at and hit each other, was funny.

The whole group turned to the window.

“*Mah yesh?*” (What does *he* want?)

I calmly explained that I am an American Jew, and that I had been standing there listening the whole time, to what the madrekh had said to them, and how they were ready to hit each other because people are not allowed to hit.

“For an American Jew, you speak good Hebrew,” said a boy. “Come inside.” He turned towards me. “Climb in the window.”

“The door is only a meter away,” I said. “Why climb through the window?”

“Let him be! He is old, let him come in through the door.”

I went into the tserif. They sat me down in the mentor’s place and began bombarding me with questions. I did not let them. First I wanted to know more about the group and about the leader, the madrekh.

“Yeah, he is a good guy. He is alright. He was in the army, a big commander. Came back to the kibbutz and is right back in the *refet* (stable).”

“That is why I don’t want a kibbutz,” said the Yeminite’s brother. “They make an *aluf* (officer) into a horse groom.”

“Fool! It’s just the opposite!” answered his sister. “A horse-groom from a kibbutz can become a *segen* (lieutenant), an *aluf*. But from the city?”

“You with your kibbutz!”

“Yes, I’m staying in the *garin* (the kernel).”

“Who told you I am not staying?”

A boy who you might take for anything, but not for a Jew, nor for white, made his case with his hands:

“But you are still arguing. *Sheket!* (Be quiet!). Let us find out who the American is. Maybe he is a millionaire. Maybe he works in the movies?”

p. 141

I said that I had to disappoint them. I was just a Yiddish writer and an editor of a children’s magazine.

“If that’s true, that’s good, too. Print each of our names in the magazine. We will correspond with American girls.”

Separately and all at once, they began to describe what kind of girls they wanted to correspond with. I cannot tell you the details, because the censor would not let it through.

I got down to asking about the group. This was a group of boys and girls, almost all of whom had lost both parents. They had been gathered from every corner of the country. Many of them had served in the army. The Etzelniks had a lot of fifteen and sixteen year-old boys and girls among their ranks. Most of this group were Moroccans and some were Yemenites. This was the first time I had seen Yemenite girls among a [mixed] group. Each of them told someone else’s biography. They could not say enough about one of them, whom they called “Jungle”. He came from somewhere deep in Morocco. He had smuggled himself in through Egypt, where he had

gotten onto a cargo ship. He was a machine gunner in the war. He could get by without food and water. When he got very hungry, he ate live mice.

“Go ahead,” they challenged him. “Show our guest how you eat a live mouse.”

“He agreed, and they were ready to find and catch a fieldmouse. I begged off. So, they suggested that he yell out the Jungle-Call for me. He prepared himself, and then let out a wild scream, smacked his hand over his mouth in order to interrupt the cry, then another scream and another clap over his mouth. Three times. The group beamed at me as a shiver ran through my body.

Among the forty in the group were about ten who were Sabras – children of our Jews<sup>1</sup>. Later I learned that this was done intentionally. Children from good families<sup>2</sup> were included in order to provide some kind of control over the group.

When we had talked our fill, the Sabras asked some of the dark-skinned boys, Jungle included, to sing something. They...

p. 142

had to be pleaded with for some time. Finally, after I intervened and doled out two packs of cigarettes, they gave in and began to sing. At first they held back a little, teasing, but once they warmed to the task, it was really something to hear. Their singing of Shabbes songs was particularly interesting to me. Neither the Sephardic pronunciation, nor the Oriental intonation could conceal the old familiar Shabbes ritual that had been sung in the little towns of Eastern Europe.

After the singing we talked more, but now more seriously. Yes, most of them wanted to stay on the kibbutz. It was pathetic how they had tried to shift the blame for their bad behavior onto each other. None of them was proud of their wildness, and they all regretted how their group had gotten such a bad name. But it was not so bad – they still had a chance to show what they could do.

When I left, I met their madrekh my way back to the hotel. I suspect that this was no accident.

“So,” he asked me, “what do you think? Can we make something out of this group?”

“I believe so,” I answered. “It’s a good sign that they are ashamed of being bad.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But while they are growing into decent human beings, I just hope they don’t burn down the kibbutz in the meantime.”

The hotel delighted me. I phoned my wife and daughter and told them to come out and spend a couple of days, and we could travel to the Jordan Valley from there. We stayed until Friday evening.

There are three things I cannot forget from the kibbutz:

The first thing is a very strange custom of theirs, not to applaud. The painter who directs the art museum invited me to give a talk to the kibbutzniks. I agreed. He stuck a flyer on the board in the dining hall, announcing that I would be speaking, in Yiddish, about "Jews in America." The hall was packed. In the middle, they had to open a divider to a second room, and dozens of people stood outside. I spoke for about an hour and a half. When I had...

p. 143

finished, the crowd stood up as one, and left. I stood by the lectern as if someone had slapped me. The host and the kibbutz doctor, who had stayed with me, were very friendly. I thought they had stayed and talked to me simply out of pity.

When I got back to the hotel, the manager was waiting for me with tea and a snack. She was very friendly and said what a shame it was that she could not attend my talk. She had to prepare the rooms for a group that was coming that night. But she had heard that it was really something special.

I said it cannot be, that she must be joking with me, and told her that the whole crowd had gotten up and left without so much as a "good night."

"Oh, that?" She laughed. "I see you didn't know that we don't applaud speakers in the kibbutz."

"It's not a nice custom," I said. "Dead silence like that, it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth."

"You are not the only one to complain about it," she reassured me. "But we don't applaud. Nothing can be done. That's the custom here in the kibbutz. Now drink your tea, and have a bite to eat."

The second thing that I cannot forget is perhaps trivial. I do not even know whether I can tell it as a story:

I happened to be acquainted with the kibbutz baker. He had been in America and had stories published in the 'Fraye Arbeter Shtime'. He asked after writers and other prominent people in New York. In the evening after dinner, he took me around to show me the kitchen and 'his' bakery.

The kitchen itself and the bakery were down in the basement of the dining hall. The food was brought up with an "elevator". The dishes were washed upstairs and the cooking and baking was done below.

He was very proud of the bakery and kept me there until after ten o'clock. We went up into the dining hall. Six girls were washing dishes. A pair of middle-aged women gathered the dishes from the tables.

p. 144

Five of the girls were no older than sixteen. They were dressed in short pants and blouses, like all young girls in the kibbutz. They washed and sang. The song they were singing was called “The Jeep”. It had a happy, lively melody and a fast tempo. A twenty-year-old Kurdistan girl sat in a corner. She was dressed as they dress there, in a wide dress with ribbons and shells. Her earrings were the size of wagon wheels. Her whole neck was wound around with beads, seven times seven times the colors of the rainbow. She was drying the silverware: forks, spoons, and knives.

Every ten minutes a girl danced up to her and took away a full bin of dried silverware, while another girl brought her a new bin full of just washed silverware. Both girls would interrupt their singing, bow to her and, nodding, ask her:

“OK?”

“OK,” she happily answered.

The baker told me that this girl’s husband was a Moroccan. They had come to the kibbutz not long before. The wife had gotten pregnant, and she was not supposed to do any work. Her pregnancy was a difficult one. But she did not want to acquiesce. She felt it was beneath her dignity to eat without working. They decided she would dry the silverware. It was a job that could be done while sitting and without exertion. Those who worked in the kitchen promised that they would make sure that she had easy work. So, the Sabra girls looked after the new kibbutznik.

The third thing that I cannot forget happened at dawn on the last day I was in the kibbutz.

The hotel was directly opposite Gilboa. The veranda is opposite the highest peak. I was told that, according to the tradition, Saul and Jonathan fell on those mountains. King David cursed Gilboa, that no rain and no dew would fall upon them and they would have no fertile fields. I would say that these mountains are frightfully barren – that a dryness emanates...

p. 145

from them. And right next to their foothills, vineyards are growing, along with vegetables and artificial ponds where fish are raised.

I loved to sit on the veranda and look at the mountains, particularly at the contrast of barrenness and lushness.

On my last day in the kibbutz I promised myself I would get up at dawn, and actually walk up to the mountain to see whether no dew fell there. I knew that it was silly. How can rain or dew avoid a patch of earth? But still, I wanted to see for myself, and touch a piece of the mountain's rock with my own hand.

I got up at dawn and went off to the mountains. I had walked a couple of hundred meters from the hotel when I stopped still in my tracks. In the tall grass there was a negro on his knees, a man

black as coal. He was elegantly dressed, and on his head, instead of a fedora or a cap, he wore a woman's nylon sack. He was praying, his eyes glazed, his hands clasped together over his heart. His lips trembled and every once in a while, he called out:

"Hallelujah!"

When he stood up and saw me, he was just as surprised as I had been. But he soon recovered and smiled.

"You could not sleep either?"

It turned out that a group of tourists had arrived in the hotel during the night. It was an organized tour, and he had joined the group. He was a minister from Rochester.

We both went to Gilboa. When we were walking back, he said to me:

"I have traveled to dozens of kibbutzim. I have also been in the miracle city Tal-Aviv. What the Jews have accomplished in this country is impossible to describe with the pen, or to tell with the tongue. But it is no surprise! God's children have returned to God's land! The valley is again settled with the Children of Israel. They dig ponds at the foot of Gilboa and fill them with all kinds of fish. God's children in God's land, in the valley at the foot of Gilboa, in the Jezreel Valley, raising fish. Why shouldn't the fish be fruitful and multiply? God's blessing is upon them!

p. 146

I tell you, I did not laugh at that devout negro priest. When you stand at dawn in the Jezreel Valley, at the foot of Mount Gilboa, and hear a speech like that, you do not laugh... you believe!

And, yes, dew falls on Mount Gilboa.

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1. *Our Jews*. Not the first time the author uses this term to refer to Ashkenazi Jews. This trip was certainly the first time he'd encountered Mizrahi Jews in any number, and his Yiddish readers were, of course, all Ashkenazi Jews as well.

2. A more literal translation of the Yiddish expression is, *children of parents*. It's not clear whether he is referring to children of 'tate-mame', similarly to the common expression *a tatns a kind*-- a child of a (respectable) father-- to mean children of 'good' families, or more literally "children with parents"— that is, who had not been orphaned.



## Chapter 14: In the Jordan Valley and the Galilee

We traveled from the Jezreel Valley to Emek HaYarden<sup>1</sup>. We could not travel direct. First, we had to stop in Tiberias. From there we had to ride for about an hour, until we came to the kibbutz in the Jordan Valley where we had landmen.

When you drive through the mountains near Lake Kinneret<sup>2</sup>, the barren stony landscape casts a pall over you. The road winds through wild plains and naked, forlorn mountains. You rarely see a settlement. The paved road snakes through tall, rocky hills. The old resident who sat next to me told me the same thing over and over, which I heard everywhere I went: Here there had been an Arab village we could not drive past. Here there was an Arab settlement. Jews had to watch themselves here, even in good times. Now, look, they're gone! The road is free and secure.

The Jewish settlements you come upon when driving leave a particular kind of impression. In the middle of the wilderness among brown rocky hills, or in the middle of fields that are overgrown with dried-out, yellow thorns, suddenly a green landscape pops up, whether in the distance or near the road: Trees, grapevines, orange groves, vegetable fields, sprinklers watering the ground, and white houses. When the settlement is next to the road, you can also see still-open trenches here and there, with mounds of red dirt piled around them.

p. 148

Lake Kinneret is even more beautiful than its praise in story and song. From the mountains, the lake looks like an oil painting, painted by a bad artist who imitates nature in every detail, and whose pictures look like photographs.

There are a lot of kibbutzim scattered around Lake Kinneret. All around them is wasteland, and the settled areas are deep green with trees and sown fields. Coincidentally, that day in the newspaper "Davar", there was a description of how the first kibbutzim around Kinneret were established. An old settler tells it:

"Forty one years ago, when I arrived here, it felt as though I had found myself on Robinson Crusoe's island. The region was barren, bordering on actual desert. Now the whole valley has been sown with Jewish settlements.

We arrived in Kibbutz A-M at two o'clock in the afternoon. We asked about our Landmen, and a man from the kibbutz office led us to the house where they lived.

The Jordan Valley is well below sea level. Moreover, it is very hot there. Because of the heat, the houses in the kibbutz have to be built very differently than in the other kibbutzim. The buildings are two-stories tall, and each has twelve rooms – six above and six below. The rooms all have two verandas, one on each side, so the ventilation is good in every room. But the nights are so hot and suffocating that the kibbutz still had to install an electric fan in every room.

My Landswoman Bella was overjoyed at our arrival, happy the way a person gets when she lives in a remote place and goes for months without seeing a new face and often whole years without a guest.

Neither her husband nor my landsman Bertshik was home. Bella told me:

“My husband is the kibbutz buyer. Of course, a kibbutz of a thousand people with a mixed economy must have a man in the city, who can provide everything the kibbutz needs. This man must know where to buy, how to buy, and when to buy. The buyer can make a kibbutz or, heaven forbid, ruin it. The other landsman, Bertshik, is the chief manager of the veneer factory. We have a large factory here...

p. 149

that fabricates wood for furniture. It's a business that takes in thousands of pounds a year. Over one hundred forty people work in this factory. That much wood has to be sold somehow. It is true, the government sets the price for every product in the country, and the demand is great. Still, one must know the ins and outs of the business. The logs are imported, and the machines are also imported. There are complicated matters of buying, selling, and conducting negotiations with government officials. There's enough to wrack your brains over.

“What do you think they get paid a week? They are kibbutzniks. This is their work for the kibbutz. Everyone does the kibbutz-work they are best suited to. One person works in the stables, another is a professor, a third is a bus driver, or a procurer or a supervisor. No one gets any wages. Everyone gets what he needs.

“My husband and Bertshik are not the only ones who work outside the kibbutz. We have three more who work in Tel-Aviv. The kibbutz has rented a house in the city, and they sleep there. A woman comes and takes care of the house and makes breakfast for them. They eat their other meals in restaurants.

“What about other expenses, and how they are monitored? Everyone spends what he feels to be necessary. Yes, they have a right to go to the theater or to concerts, and to buy newspapers and magazines, but we can depend on our people. A kibbutznik is not going to spend an unnecessary dime. He will economize for the kibbutz even more than someone would economize with his own money.”

I had a vague sense that I had heard of something like this arrangement before. Then I remembered. Yes, this is how the Essenes did it a long time ago, in the time of the Second Temple. Some of them worked there in the village, and others worked in the city, but remained comrades in their communal group.

My landswoman gave a start. “Well look at that. I'm talking and talking, and completely forgotten that it's time to eat.”

We went off to the dining room. It was Friday. We were served an extraordinary meal.

p. 150

I thought, *This must be a rich kibbutz if they serve such a wonderful meal on Friday afternoon. What will they serve for Friday night dinner, or for Shabbes lunch?*

The afternoon went quickly. Towards evening, we went out to meet the bus. A flock of sheep was returning from a field. The shepherd ran in front and stationed himself by the entrance gate to the kibbutz. A large shepherd dog made sure no sheep lagged behind the flock. This was the first time I saw a dog in Israel. Jewish farmers do not keep dogs. Nor do the kibbutzim. I asked why people do not keep dogs, and was told that, first, it costs a lot to keep a dog, and second, dogs get hydrophobia (rabies).

The shepherd stood by the gate. He was tall, thin, and young, with a sunburnt face. He had a strange wide-brimmed hat on his head, and a sack on his side. He held a long staff, turned like a poker, in his hand and with it he divided the flock into two. Half of the sheep to the left, and half to the right. He did it so skillfully and quickly, and with such a strange effortless calm, that it seemed to me as if he was a son and grandson of shepherds stretching all the way back to Father Jacob.

I asked Bela about him. She told me that the young man was a discharged soldier, the son of a kibbutznik. He had been an officer in the army. After his discharge, he returned to his sheep. He has been raising sheep for ten years, since he was thirteen years old. The young man is very talented. He will yet be heard from some day.

Strange thoughts crept into my head. How many of our fathers and mothers would have been content for their talented son to become a shepherd? And if he did achieve such a low status wouldn't the rest of us have felt sorry for him.

Bela's husband and my landsman Bertshik arrived on the last bus. An hour later we were seated on a bench in the shade near the water tower. A young man also sat with us, a garage mechanic with his lovely little boy. I listened while...

p. 151

they told me about the kibbutz economy and about dozens of little details. The garage-man said:

"In honor of our guests, let us all eat dinner together. We can sit around one table, and it will be festive."

My landsman Bertshik answered him:

"You eat together. But I cannot eat with you. It's my *tor* (turn) in the kitchen."

I complained. "How is that possible, Bertshik? I am a guest here. We have not seen each other for thirty-eight years. Who knows if we will get to see each other again in our lifetimes? And this very Shabbes you are on kitchen duty. And what kind of work is that anyway, for a manager who

brings in so much money for the kibbutz? You languish in the city all week and when you come home on Shabbes to your wife and children, you still have to work in the kitchen, too?"

Bertshik smiled.

"I see you want to make a big shot out of me. We don't have big shots here. Manager--shmanager. It's a job like any other job. Everyone here does what they are capable of doing. Yes, it is true: If I had known a week ago that you would be coming to visit us, I would have arranged it so I would not be in the kitchen this Shabbes. I would have switched my turn to a week later. Now, it's too late. No one wants to be in the kitchen on Shabbes. To put a someone else in my place who did not expect to work in the kitchen, and who likely planned to do something else, is not fair. If someone gets sick or in some other serious situations, so be it. It can't be helped. But to do this only for the sake of my own pleasure is not nice."

We ate the Friday night meal without Bertshik. To my surprise, the meal was quite meager. A simple meal like on any other night of the week. I was more than a little distressed. OK, if a kibbutz treats Shabbes like a weekday out of poverty, there's nothing you can do. But to serve a Sabbath-like meal on Friday afternoon and then an ordinary meal on Friday night, that is really spiteful.

Overall, there was no hint of Shabbes in the dining hall, and throughout the kibbutz, Shabbes was tedious. People wandered around...

p. 152

without a goal or purpose, with nothing to do with themselves the whole day. OK, to be honest, they did show a Russian film on Friday night.

Bella and her husband gave us their room and slept somewhere else. At four o'clock in the morning, there was a knock on the door:

"Bella, it's past four. You'll be late."

I understood that they were calling my hostess to work, and answered.

"She isn't sleeping here. She gave her room to us."

The knocker excused himself and went away. I could not go back to sleep. *What a strange little world it is here. The head of a factory languishes in the city all week and when he comes home on Shabbes, he has to do his share in the kitchen. The head of procurement for the kibbutz is also gone far from home all week. So he comes home to his wife on Shabbes, and she has to get up at four o'clock in the morning to work in the vineyard.*

Our hostess got back from work around one in the afternoon. At four o'clock, she came to us in our room. It was teatime. But she would not go to the dining hall with us for tea. In honor of us,

her guests, she would make tea and coffee here in the room. She had also invited her next-door neighbor to tea, along with the garage man.

She had brought two kinds of cake from the dining room, along with sugar, coffee and tea. We sat pleasantly on the veranda and talked: The garage man and his wife, who worked in the children's house; the buyer for the kibbutz and his wife, who worked in the fields; and the neighbor, a professor of English, who had led special courses for a group of students in New York University, and his wife who is apparently a teacher in the kibbutz. The three families sat together and spoke about kibbutz matters. I sat and drank up every word. I have never seen such equality and true democracy.

In the middle of the conversation, Chaim remarked:

“Do you know who I saw in Kibbutz Sh-M? Boruch Cohn” (not his real name).

“What was he doing there?” the professor asked, clearly alarmed.

p. 153

“He is not a member of the kibbutz,” Chaim answered. “He is just working there. When he noticed me, he looked like he had seen a ghost. First, he turned red as a beet, then white as chalk. Evidently, he was shocked. I looked into it and found out that he only works there. So, you don't take food out of someone's mouth, even an unpleasant character like that.”

I was curious, and began to ask what they were talking about. Chaim told me.

“This man was in our kibbutz for a year. We began to notice that members were missing things. We looked into it, and suspicion fell on him. We chose two comrades to look into the matter further. When he was in the field, they went into his room and they found a lot of stolen things. They took everything they found and laid it out on his table and on the floor. They left the clothes closet open, and they did not close the door to his room. When he got back to his room from work, he understood that his secret was found out, and he quickly packed his suitcase and left the kibbutz.”

Since we were on the subject, we continued to discuss stealing in the kibbutz.

“No, such cases are rare. When they do happen, the kibbutz does not conduct a trial. The thieves are allowed to go, but they cannot be kibbutzniks any more.”

One more episode about the kibbutz in the Jordan Valley is worth telling:

Chaim took us to dinner at a nearby kibbutz, no more than four or five kilometers from his. Our driver was the garage man. He hitched up horse and wagon, and drove us over. He himself went right back to the kibbutz, because he had to get his trucks back on the road after sunset.

The kibbutz A.-Y. was one of the old kibbutzim. It lies on the Syrian border. The whole kibbutz is one lush park. A large group took us around to show us the kibbutz economy. All of them knew Chaim. He had been a member of A.-Y. for more than fifteen years. When he got married, he went over to his wife's kibbutz.

p. 154

We ate supper at our own separate table. Six of the old zealots sat around us, all of them with gray hair and wrinkles, with sunburnt faces and heavily calloused hands. We sat and prepared the salad. Everyone made their own salad themselves. They were made too slowly and deliberately. Carefully they skinned the cucumbers and threw the skins into the Kolboynik. When they had cut the cucumbers into thin slices, they turned to the green peppers, cutting them open, taking out the seeds, shaking every piece of pepper over the kolboynik and then cutting the pepper into long ribbons. Done with the peppers, they would select tomatoes, looking each one over carefully. They would cut out the rotten "eyes", if there were any, and then they quartered each tomato. The greens were mixed with a spoon and salted. Then, they carefully poured on a little bit of vinegar, and a fair amount of *shemen* oil. The salad was tasted with the tip of the tongue, to see if it was right. If not, more vinegar, more oil, or more salt, until it was they way they wanted it.

So sat the old die-hards, making their salads and talking.

"There's a lot to deal with at our kibbutz," said Chaim. "There is a large opposition there to our wood factory. A lot of our old-timers argue that we are no longer real kibbutzniks, because the farm suffers on account of our factory. The worst thing is, we do not have enough workers and we have to hire outside workers from the city. Now, eating and sleeping has become an issue. Since we are far from the city, so the workers have to eat and sleep at the kibbutz. So we charge them for eating and sleeping. A lot of the comrades complain: 'Since when does a kibbutz charge for eating and sleeping?' But that is nonsense! To not account for the meals of occasional guests is one thing. Feeding seventy workers day in and day out is another thing."

"It's the same thing here with us," answered a friend. It has to do with hiring outside workers. Moreover, we want to enlarge our *riba*, our jam factory. We cannot manage without hiring outside workers. But (others complain), 'If so, do we really need a jam factory?'"

A third man spoke:

p. 155

"There's a fine mess! Give up a factory! And what if there's a bad year in the fields? What if the prices for fruits and vegetables, or milk and eggs fall? No kibbutz can exist without a mixed economy. They have already forgotten the early years of poverty and need."

"But it's exploitation, nonetheless!"

“Who is exploiting whom? Who is pocketing the profits?”

“We are all taking it. Collectively, we live better.”

“The same arguments we hear at our place,” said Chaim.

One of the old-timers had put down his spoon and began talking fervently, emphasizing his words with his hands.

“So, good. I agree. Not everything here is according to the *Shulkhn Orekh*<sup>3</sup>. But I ask you, comrades, have we refused to admit the workers into the kibbutz? We want to, but they do not want to. So, what are we supposed to do? Give up the kibbutz? Should we be like the Luddite machine breakers who wanted to stop the industrialization of the world? There has to be a way out of this tangle!”

“By all means, let us hear it!”

“Wise guy. If I knew the way out, would I keep it a secret? I only know that the way out is not giving up the factory. To keep on having hired workers is also not good. The complication regarding how much to charge for meals is a truly unpleasant matter. But we are not the only kibbutz to be caught in a bind. It will have to be discussed and decided at the party conference.”

“A fine thing it would be,” joked one of them, “if a strike broke out on a kibbutz.”

Everyone laughed.

“Oh, what a fine time that would be!”

“You laugh,” a comrade said, bitterly. “Fie on your laughter.”

“So, cry then! My conscience is clean. I live in no better a room than our hired workers do. I have just as much money in the bank as I had before the factory opened, and I’m no better dressed. What more do you want?”

p. 156

“OK, that's enough,” said Chaim. “We are not going solve all our problems today.”

The conversation switched to the price of wine grapes in the Jerusalem market, and how many tomatoes and cucumbers the kibbutz produced this year. Whether it was more than last year or fewer.

On the way back I was driven by truck. I left that kibbutz in the morning, and we arrived in another kibbutz in the Galilee late in the afternoon.

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The kibbutz in the Galilee is almost exclusively an American kibbutz. There are also some young people from England and from Africa – all from among the English-speaking demographic.

As soon as we arrived at the kibbutz, my daughter and I went with one of their members to see the Jordan River, which cut through the kibbutz.

I walked up to it and saw a little river with high banks, just like a deeply dug-out canal. A stream of yellow-green water flowed quickly and forcefully. I took off my shoes, waded into the water, and stood there for a good long while. Then I sat down on a stone with my feet in the water, letting the river flow between my legs. I was so engrossed, I had not even noticed that my daughter had also taken off her shoes and sat down next to me with her feet in the water, too.

My companion told me.

“Now, in the summertime, the Jordan looks like a little riverlet with a narrow stream. You ought to see it during the rainy season! It fills up over its banks, high as they are. You think the Jordan is something to play with?”

Where had I heard that before? Ah, yes. In Joshua it is written: *The Jordan is full over all its banks in all the days of harvest time.* And soon another verse came up into my memory, a verse that at first did not have any connection with my thoughts:

*And I walked across the Jordan with my walking stick, and now I am become two camps.* From this Rashi interprets: "I did not have any silver, any gold, or any livestock, only my stick itself, and now I have become two camps."

p. 157

Here we were, my little girl and I, sitting on the banks of the Jordan with its waters rinsing our feet. How many times had Jews crossed the Jordan to go into foreign lands, and returned? An individual received an order to settle in Canaan. He obeyed. His family increased and seventy souls went voluntarily into exile – into Egypt. There they stayed for four hundred years, and they came back as a people, back to their promised land. They got the land and lived there for over six hundred years and then were driven out. Returned a couple of generations later, strengthened in their belief in their chosen-ness. Originally, they came into the country with Aramaic and left with Hebrew. Then driven from the land as Hebrew speakers with the destruction of the first Temple, they returned with two tongues – Hebrew and Aramaic. Driven out a second time, and people were again bilingual, and the intelligentsia, trilingual. Now, nineteen hundred years later, the people has returned again. On the banks of the Jordan, there is once again a Jewish settlement where I hear three languages: Yiddish, English, and Hebrew. What kind of strength lies in this narrow body of water called the Jordan? What power lies in this remote bit of poor land, which still pulls this same people back?

“Yes, It fills up over its banks, high as they are. The Jordan is not something to play with!”



My acquaintances looked for me and found me sitting with my feet in the flowing current of the Jordan. They made fun of me:

“A Litvak should be so sentimental!”

As I live and breathe, they were right.

We were not at that kibbutz for long. The comfort and sanitary conditions were so poor, that we could not stay over there for more than one night. But I am very happy that we did not skip that kibbutz.

I spent that evening with a young Jewish man from Africa<sup>4</sup>. He had married the daughter of an acquaintance of mine. She was American born, a nursing school graduate, who went...

p. 158

to Israel before the war. She met this young Jewish man from Africa, who had served in a very important post in the army, and they married. They were only temporarily on the kibbutz. The young man had organized a new community out of a group that had received their preparatory training from the American kibbutz here. This group would be leaving this kibbutz before Rosh Hashone. They already had the land. They are planning a Moshav, a worker's cooperative, but at first the Moshav will be organized as a kibbutz, because it is more economical.

I sat and talked with the young man until very late into the night. He knew little Hebrew and practically no Yiddish at all, so we spoke English. He knew very little about Judaism even now. He comes from a very wealthy family, has completed university, and has never done any physical labor. He is tall, good-looking and energetic, and is an extremely good organizer. I really wanted to get to the bottom of why he had come to Israel and why he stayed in the country. He could just take his wife and live a much easier life in Cape Town.

Here is what I gleaned from his conversation.

His Jewishness has never caused him any unease. He came here in the time of the War of Independence, because after the World War, he could not find anything fitting to do with himself. Traveling to, and fighting for, Israel was a kind of whim, an adventure, a way out of his postwar restlessness. When he saw the land and the life in the land, he had no desire to return home. When he met Naomi and married her, he decided to stay here. He especially liked the pioneering spirit of the kibbutzim and the justice in how they were organized. It was a concrete realization of the misty, abstract ethical Judaism his father had always talked about. He liked the primitiveness, freedom and honesty of the life here in general.

That night it became clear to me that Zionist leaders could accomplish a lot with the American Jewish youth if they, the leaders, appealed to young American Jews to come to Israel in order to live a just and ethical life. As of now, they go on and on telling young American Jews to run away from America, because anti-Semitism is bad and is going to get worse. According to the...

Zionist view, Jews are foreigners everywhere. But young American Jews do not feel themselves to be foreigners in America. They are a restless youth, who seek justice and righteousness. They strive for a better life, for a more idealistic life. Such a life can easily be found in the State of Israel. A truly large portion of Jewish youth would be influenced by propaganda that placed its emphasis on idealism.

We got up early to leave on the first bus. The dining room was already open. There we met the African young man and two young Jewish Brooklynites. I know their parents very well. They are very prosperous Jews. The young men were dressed like peasants, ready to head out to the field. The spoke to me in English:

“Tell them over there in East Flatbush that they should stop talking about Zionism and come here. Who needs them there? Here we can put every one of them to use, especially a couple of good plumbers and machinists. Say hi to our fathers.

We parted. I promised the young African man that I would visit his new kibbutz/moshav in three years at the longest. We rode back to Ra’Anana.

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1. The Jordan Valley. Here, the Northern part of the Jordan Valley and the area around [the West of] Lake Kinneret.

2. Lake Kinneret. In English, also called The Sea of Galilee, and also Lake Tiberias.

3. Shulkhon Orekh-- A legal code, written in the sixteenth century and still consulted by haredi and orthodox Jews.

4. In 1950, there were roughly 100,000 Jews (nearly all of Ashkenazi origin) living in South Africa.

## Chapter 15: In a Religious Kibbutz

I met and spoke with a lot of observant<sup>1</sup> Jews in the State of Israel. They have dozens of complaints and demands, both to the government and to the populace. Their primary complaint is, “Lo yaysen ken b’Yisroel”—one does not conduct oneself this way or live this way in Yidn-Land. To come to the Land of Israel and live a goyish life, without Torah and without Mitsves, they argue, is meaningless. To live in the Land of Israel is a privilege. Jews have a duty to be more observant and God-fearing.

The general population does not, heaven forbid, prevent the observant from their practices. But it is clear that if the observant got power, they would prevent the great majority in Israel, which is far from religiously observant, from living as it wishes. The observant want to force a strict Sabbath on them, to institute a different school system and to impose the rules of kosher food in public places. In general, they would have the *Shulkhn Orekh*<sup>2</sup> be the legal framework for the country.

On the surface there does not seem to be any difference between the secular Jews and the observant. Naturally I do not mean the ultra-orthodox. They all dress similarly, and speak Yiddish and Hebrew. Their school systems are almost the same. But this is only on the surface. At bottom, there is a large gulf between the two worldviews. Let’s take, for example, the public school.

I visited a Mizrahi<sup>3</sup> school and a common school. Fundamentally, there is a gulf between the two schools. In the common school, the ‘external’ subjects...

p. 161

like geography, natural science, literature, history and mathematics are the core subjects. Tanakh and Mishnah are a kind of supplement. In the Mizrahi school, Tanakh, Mishnah, and Shulkhn Orekh are the core subjects, and the external subjects are the supplement.

One illustration: In the public school, I saw a lot of children’s projects. The projects were the same as in the American public schools, but in Hebrew. In the Mizrahi school, the children’s projects were only about Torah, about Jewish customs and laws.

The first and second grades in the Mizrahi school had completed a large project about Bries-oylem, the Creation of the World. There was a large rectangular board, with a hole in the middle, and a child showed me what God had created each day, putting the correct picture in the hole in the board.

I saw a project about the *pare adume* [the red cow]. First the difference between a duty and a *Mitsve* was described, with lovely Torah-script handwriting, giving the passage of Rashi that discusses the second verse of *Parshe Khukas*<sup>4</sup>. Then it described how the red cow would be bought and prepared. There were also the stories from the Talmud about the red cow. After that, the two pages of the Gemore [Gemara], one listing the commandments of the Torah that are like decrees from God which cannot be questioned, because human understanding cannot grasp them;

and the second page listing the commandments that have a reason, an explanation that human understanding can grasp why God gave them.

The *m'naheyl* (principal), a Litvak with a tall figure and a rabbinical ordination, lamented to me that the state does not support the religious schools as generously as the general public schools. The elites do not come to their school events, and other complaints. In general, the observant Jews feel a little bit in exile in the State of Israel.

In fact, he was not right. The support given to the religious schools is not less than that to the general schools. The fact that the intelligentsia do not come to their celebrations in the orthodox schools is simply because the intelligentsia are not orthodox. They feel as though they are in exile because they are a small minority. The broader population is far from being observant. For example, it's...

p. 162

a lot harder to find a kosher restaurant in Tel Aviv than it is in New York. The masses are not interested in kosher observance. The broad population does not want to keep Shabbes in the orthodox manner either. The observant see people driving private cars and taxis on Shabbes, and consider it to be a scandal. The general population, however, does not like that the observant sector has been allowed to close the cinemas and stop bus traffic on Shabbes.

The conflict over observance is the only conflict between the two groups. On other basic questions, there is no trace of conflict. The stance towards refugees, the manner in which the war was fought, the economic position of the government, the question of Jerusalem – on all these points there is unity.

The urban orthodox Jews do not have special problems or difficulties. After all, their life in the cities and towns of Israel is no different than life in cities all over the Jewish diaspora. What's more, it is easier for observant Jews in the State of Israel to keep their Jewishness. Shabbes is the official day of rest. There is not a non-Jewish [majority] population to which one must adapt economically and spiritually. Education can be more completely Jewish. The economic circumstances do not force children to devote time to learning a foreign language or with studies that are not Jewish.

But it is different in the kibbutzim. There are a lot of challenges for the observant element there. It is hard to keep Shabbes on a kibbutz, where the economic life is tied to agriculture and animal husbandry. The question of *shmite* [laws regarding the sabbatical year] is not thoroughly resolved, and *leket*, *shikkhe*, and *peye*, are also difficult commandments to uphold<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, I very much wanted to go to a religious kibbutz. I wanted to see their customs with my own eyes and talk with the kibbutzniks in person. But something delayed me every time.

A week before I left Israel, it happened that a relative of my sister-in-law, who is a teacher in a religious kibbutz, invited us to her wedding. My sister-in-law comes from a very prominent

Hassidic family, and has connections to the religious sector. I was very happy to have the opportunity. I was...

p. 163

especially happy that the kibbutz bore the name “Khofetz Khayim.” I have a connection to the Khofetz Khayim<sup>6</sup> – I studied in his Yeshiva in Radin and ate my Sabbath meals at his table for a full year.

We left for the wedding on Thursday afternoon. To write out the words “we left for the wedding,” or to say these words, is easy. But the trip itself was a whole adventure. Normally, the bus goes there once a day, at eight o’clock in the morning. Now, because of the wedding, a special bus had been ordered. “Egged,” the cooperative that has a monopoly on transportation to southern Judea, could not spare more than one bus. One “special” bus cannot take one hundred people. However the bus was packed, forty people would have to be left out, and the kibbutz had to send a truck for them. So, don’t even ask what happened at the bus station. I got in because of my older in-law, the mother of my sister-in-law. She is a ninety year-old woman. She with her highest status, could bring her guests. I held onto her hand and got in with my wife and daughter.

The trip in the packed bus was actually pleasant. Despite the mass that had squeezed itself in, everyone was polite and in good spirits. The crowd felt itself at home with its own. People knew each other and called each other by their first names. Also, they were happy – they were going to a wedding. People exchanged jokes and witticisms and then began to sing. When they were talking, people talked exclusively in Yiddish, except that when someone talked to a child, they spoke Hebrew. The singing was all in Hebrew.

At the beginning, the singing was a little slow. Only the men sang. I was surprised and did not understand what was happening. True, a lot of women were dressed with their heads covered in scarves. But the scarves were tied around their heads so coquettishly that it had not occurred to me that only married women were wearing scarves, and they hid their own hair.

I started to ask for the women to help us out...

p. 164

in singing. They hesitated. A Jew with an ascetic appearance and with a flat, thin beard, got angry. “*Kol Shebaish*—a woman’s voice is obscene.”

But here the old in-law interjected, the one with great status:

“No matter. It’s OK. Since we are going to a wedding, everyone may sing. Sing, daughters!”

And they sang. Everyone sang. I have never heard such warm, heartfelt, and varied song. They sang pioneer songs, Hebrew folk songs, popular radio songs, and parts of bible passages and prayers.

That was how we arrived at the kibbutz, with songs in our mouths. On our arrival, we were met by children in yarmulkes, yelling and clamorous. They chased the bus until it stopped, and they sang along with us. I must confess: The children got to me. *That I might suffer instead of thy dear little bones!* It has been a long, long, time, close to four decades, since I have seen children running up to welcome wedding guests.

The guests poured out of the bus and there was hugging and kissing all around. Before you knew it, men women and children were in a ring of Hassidic dance. Of course, the women danced separately. Even the little girls danced only in the women's circle.

People were all danced out. But it was still too early for the wedding. Then, too, a lot of relatives were still missing. We had to wait for the truck with the rest of the in-laws. The crowd went off to look at the kibbutz. I stayed near the dining hall, which was open to the clear sky. A huge swath of ground, fifty meters long by fifty meters wide, was paved with asphalt. Tables and benches, made out of stones and cement, had been installed on it. The tabletops were made from one piece of stone. I stood and marveled at the primitive beauty of the work, and at the same time thought to myself: *What do they do in the rainy months?*

p. 165

A young man with a red beard and not very long peyes materialized beside me:

"I see that you are wondering about our dining hall. We cannot help it. We took over three quarters of our old dining hall as a synagogue. We do not have enough money for a new building. So, we built a dining hall in the open air. There are big problems in *onot hagshamim* (the rainy season). We try to spread a tarp over the tables and benches. But the Israeli rain could go through boards, let alone through linen. We suffer.

He led me into the small dining room that had a roof. On one side was the roomy synagogue, and on the other side, the large kitchen. The middle room, which could hold only about fifty people, was not just a dining room, but also a library. There were shelves from the floor to the ceiling, stuffed with religious books. I surveyed the books: Talmuds and more Talmuds. You could see they were not just there for the sake of appearances, but were really being studied. There wasn't just a complete edition standing there the way libraries have them, but the books were separated by tractate. The most popular tractates of orders *Nezikin*, *Moed*, and *Nashim* had at least a dozen and more like twenty copies of each tractate. Of the less popular tractates, which are studied less often, there were two or three copies each. There were also a lot of books of commentary, like the books *Pnei Yehoshua* and *Shita Mekubetses*. And there were ethics books: *Mesillas Yeshorim*, *Chovot HaLevavot*, *Chofetz Chaim*, and a lot of other books from the publisher "Mossad HaRov Kook". These books were not new ones. The covers were torn and the pages tattered.

"I see that people study avidly here," I said to the young man.

“Thanks to his Blessed Name, we study a little. But you know that study is one of the three things that have no limit and no measure.”

Meanwhile, my wife had come in, and she said to me:

“You must come see the bride’s room. You have never seen anything like it in your whole life.”

“What is so special here in this kibbutz, that I have never seen it in my whole life?”

p. 166

“Come, see it with your own eyes, and you will admit that I am right,” my wife said.

I excused myself to the young man and went with my wife. Yes, it was, in fact, something to see. The bride’s room was four fingers long and two fingers wide. The kibbutz had made her an apartment out of an “elevator.” An elevator simply meant a large crate. A lot of machines come to Israel from America. The machines are sent in large wooden crates. People take the crates and set them up on their narrow side. They cut out holes for windows, and a larger hole for a door. The crates are covered with tarpaper and... you have an apartment.

I stood there and marveled at the devotion with which the crate-room had been decorated: Whitewashed in two colors, the floor colored red and the little windows decorated with curtains. The furniture consisted of two beds, a small table, two chairs and a pair of shelves with some books. Everything was neat and clean, a true dollhouse. It was lovely to look at the apartment. But how someone could live in such a tiny room, I do not know. Later, after the wedding, I spoke with the couple. I could literally feel their piety, simplicity, commitment to the kibbutz, and great love for the Torah. I knew that they would be a lot happier in their crate than a lot of people who live in mansions. And it absolutely will be a real Jewish home.

The wedding canopy was erected. For young men held up the spread-out four corners of a tallis for a *chuppah*. Two women from the kibbutz escorted the bride. My old in-law, who was standing next to me, gave a sob and whispered:

“She is the only one left from her whole big family in Poland. May God grant her health and long years, and may she found a new generation of God-fearing Jews.”

The groom was brought to the chuppah. I nearly fell off my bench. His figure was indescribable. But that is not what surprised me: Beauty is a gift from God. But his clothing: He wore brown sport pants and an “Eisenhower” jacket, which made his fine...

p. 167

figure even more evident. Brown, shined shoes, a white shirt with a bow tie, a blue yarmulke on his head, and a silk tallis thrown over his shoulders.

The women guests opened their eyes and their mouths wide: “*Keyn eynore*, what a handsome man!”<sup>7</sup>

Later I learned that the beautiful and pious bridegroom is the sports teacher on the kibbutz.

The wedding ceremony was short and flew by. Soon after, the singing and dancing began. The men and women danced separately. They danced a hora, and the men sang. The women danced quietly, but one woman accompanied the dancing with a harmonica. They did not sing any kibbutz songs, but they set verses to kibbutz melodies. First they sang verses from Jeremiah 33. As the crowd set up and linked their hands across their shoulders, a fifty-year-old, with a trimmed black beard began the song

*Od yishomah bamokom hazeh*<sup>8</sup>-- “There shall again be heard in this place...”

The crowd rocked, danced and answered with a horah melody:

*Kol sosen vekol simkho, kol khoson vekol kalo*-- “A voice of gladness and a voice of joy, a voice of a groom and a voice of a bride.”

They danced and danced, stopped for a while, swayed and the Jew with the trimmed beard sung out again:

*Kol umrim*— “A voice of those who speak.”

And the crowd started dancing a new horah and answered:

*Hodu es Adonay tsevaos, ki tov Adonay ki leyoylom khasdo*— “Praised be the God of Hosts, because God is good, because His mercy endures forever.”

Done dancing these passages from Jeremiah, they sang out verses from Psalms 118:

*Kol rino viyeshuo beholey tsadikim*— “A voice of song and help in the tents of the righteous.”

Then they sang their own version of the well-known kibbutz song.

“Hava netza bimechol...”

p. 168

“Let us dance, let us dance around for the work, for the kibbutz, for the defense [the army], for the training. “

A journalist who sat next to me made fun of them.



“Khnyokes<sup>9</sup>. Look how uncreative they are. They do not even have the wherewithal to create their own songs. They take everything from ready-made songs, from old verses and clichés.”

I turned my head away from him. I sat and looked in the distance. We were in Southern Judea. The kibbutz was a green dot in the wilderness. Jews had come from Hungary, from France, from Lithuania, from Russia and Poland, and returned to settle this ruined land, this barren ground. How can they stop marveling at this great miracle? Jeremiah’s prophecies were living words in the mouths of these, the gathered-in of Israel:

*God spoke, saying, “In very this place where you have said-- It is barren, without people and without livestock, and the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, which are deserted, without people and without inhabitants— will again be heard a voice of gladness and a voice of joy, a voice of a groom and a voice of a bride, a voice among those that say, Praised be the God of Hosts, because God is good, because His mercy endures forever.”*

One would have to be a hard-bitten journalist, or a rational robot, to not be moved by the singing of these verses sung in this tiny settlement in Judah in the middle of the wilderness. They see God’s hand in the wonder that has happened before their own eyes. For them, Jeremiah’s words are not just old songs, set down in an old book. They are the living words of a living God. Let the non-believer hold his tongue!

The crowd was told to come sit around the tables. I wanted...

p. 169

to sit among the kibbutzim. I was not allowed, and we were shown a place at the front, near the groom. My wife was seated at a different table, with the women, near the bride.

We were given a good meal: Fish, soup, roast chicken and compote. As my habit is, I did not sit still in one place. In the middle of the meal I went over to the table where the young man with the red beard sat, among the kibbutzniks. I saw that they were eating a normal poor weekday kibbutz meal. The young man told me:

“We eat fish and chicken only once a week – on Shabbes. So, eating fish and chicken twice in one week is too big a luxury for us. We do not want to make a weekday into Shabbes, whether there is a wedding or not. However, we made a wedding meal for the outside guests. We wouldn’t want, Heaven forbid, to embarrass the bride and groom.”

After the meal we said the blessings as a group. The kibbutz rabbi stood up and gave a talk. He praised the groom for his piety and for his drive to learn Torah. Then he began his pilpul [discussion of fine points of Talmudic interpretation]. The crowd not only sat quietly, but hung on the rabbi’s every word. The journalist somehow reappeared next to me and whispered in my ear:

“Country or no country; war or no war – the old idle nonsense.”

I asked him not to bother me. It was hard enough for me to follow the rabbi's brilliance. The journalist teased me:

"The Yeshiva bokher<sup>10</sup> from Khofetz Khayim has reawakened in you."

Next, the children gave a presentation in honor of the bride and groom. I sat very close to them, but I could not catch the meaning of their satire. It all had to do with the bride and groom, about their work in the kibbutz, and apparently also jokes about certain customs in the kibbutz. I sought out the man with the red beard and asked him if he wanted to stay there or go somewhere and chat with me. He went with me a bit farther away from the dining room and we talked:

"Feeding the cows and chickens on Shabbes is permitted according to the law. It is an act of compassion for a living creature, after all. As for milking the cows on Shabbes, they are milked with a machine that is set on a timer. Yes, in a lot of religious kibbutzim they are milked by hand, but they do not use the milk..."

p. 170

directly – only what comes from the milk: cheese, sour cream and butter. There are *mekilim* [lenient rabbis], but here on the kibbutz we are among the *makhmirim* [rabbis who interpret strictly].

"The question of *shmite*? Two years from now, when *shmite* arrives, we will observe the *shmite*. Over course it would be good if we had a diversified economy. In the sabbatical year we could draw our sustenance from a factory. But we are poor, and we will have to depend on assistance. Yes, it is a poor kibbutz. Before us, it was a Shomer Hatzair<sup>11</sup> kibbutz. They relinquished their charter, and we took over the ground five years ago. It's been hard. There was not enough land. Now, praise His Blessed Name, after the victory we have enough land, vineyards and orchards.

"Conquered the land by the sword? We did not conquer it. We did not come into a foreign country and take the inhabitants' land away by force. We returned to the Land of Israel. Seven countries attacked us, just as in the past: The *sheva amim*<sup>12</sup>. We fought a war against them and, thanks to His Blessed Name, vanquished them. It is not written anywhere that one is not permitted to fight a war. It was a just war. We did not go and start a war to enlarge the borders of the country.

"In our kibbutz we do not have anyone from the Youth Aliyah. We are too poor to support them.

"Yes, we have a Talmud study group, a Mishnah group, even a group for Psalms. But to tell the truth, we cannot study as much as we would like. We have to work hard, and we are tired. But we carve out time, and we have a whole day to study on Shabbes."

The crowd was still celebrating and carrying on, and we kept talking. When he found out that I had studied with Khofetz Khayim and eaten at his table on Shabbes, he was delighted. He suggested that we all stay for Shabbes.

"You have no tallis or tfillin? So, in the morning, there are two minyans, You can use my tfillin. We have taleysim for guests. On Shabbes, you will hear a discourse on the Gemara, and see how we observe Shabbes here."

The partying was done, and the evening prayers began. After the evening prayers, it was announced that those who wanted to stay over should sign up, and they...

p. 171

would be given tents. For those who wanted to go back, a truck would take them at eleven o'clock.

I signed up to stay overnight. The young man excused himself:

"I would keep talking with you longer, but I have to go on guard duty tonight."

A truck arrived. The kibbutzniks set up benches on it, and those guests who wanted to ride back to the city began getting on. The kibbutz gathered around the guests to say goodbye. They parted with a song. The crowd sang the verse from Psalms:

*Yemin Adonay romemo, Yemin Adonay yoso khail*—God's right hand is uplifted, God's right hand does great deeds.

When they sang the words "God's right hand is lifted" the red-headed young man along with two other men who were standing with rifles, ready to go on guard duty, raised their rifles into the air.

The bus started to move. Everyone, in unison, called out their farewell: "Shalom, Yidn! Shalom Yidn!"

My wife and I were given a tent to sleep in. There was no light in the tent. We felt around in the darkness and found two army beds without bedding and without sheets. Each bed had a sleeping bag. We undressed, got in the sleeping bags and pulled the "zipper" up to our necks. We closed our eyes.

I could not fall asleep. I pictured the Yeshiva of Khofetz Khayim in Radin and the hundreds of bokhers there as though they were alive in front of me. How would they, those yeshiva bokhers, have fitted in here? With great effort, I could imagine that those ecstatically pious young men, great students and moralists, might have been able to drive a tractor and milk cows. But there was no way that I could reconcile those bokhers, who used to sing portions of *The Path of the Just* and *Duties of the Heart* in the evening, with holding rifles on their shoulders. It is a rupture in Jewish history. Here the pious Jews who till fields, cut grapevines, sow potatoes, who know how to get along with cows and horses, and who are not afraid of rifles,...

p. 172

and machine guns cannot remain the same unworldly zealots as the Yeshiva bokhers from the Khefets Khayim Yeshiva in Radin.

I smiled to myself, as a strange thought occurred to me:

*It's possible that some day this kibbutz will raise horses for the track, bring them to market and even ride them in horse races with gambling. How would this jibe with The Path of the Just and Duties of the Heart, with the Shita Mekubetzes and the Pnei Yehoshua, and with their beards and peyes?*

Jackals could be heard howling in the distance. Field mice ran into and out of the tent. I rolled over from one side onto the other and could not fall asleep. Finally, I dozed off. My wife shook me.

“Shloime, get up. A mouse ran over my face.”

I answered her. “Go to sleep. It’s nothing. There are field mice. We are next to a field.”

My wife answered, trembling:

“I am afraid to go to sleep. I often sleep with my mouth open. A mouse could go in my mouth.”

We waited out the night. At the break of day we got dressed. My sister-in-law in her tent had not been able to sleep either because of the mice. A bus drove by the kibbutz at six o’clock in the morning. We left with that bus.

I was not destined to hear the rabbi’s Talmudic discourse nor to see the young man with the red beard and study a page of Gemara together. He was surely disappointed. Me too. Apparently, the Yeshiva bokher had, in fact, reawakened in me.

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1. The Yiddish word *frum* has no exact English equivalent. Applied to individuals, it can mean ‘observant’ or ‘pious’ (in both senses of the word), or it can be applied to groups to mean Orthodox Jews, in contrast to members of more liberal Jewish denominations or to secular Jews. Haredi (or “ultra-orthodox”) groups were a very small part of the population in 1949.

2. *Shulkhn Orekh*, (often transliterated from the Hebrew as *Shulchan Aruch*). See note to chapter 14. Used there ironically, here literally.

3. *Mizrachi* here refers not to Jews of Africa and the Arab lands, but to the religious Zionist movement originating in Eastern Europe that founded a religious school system in Israel.

4. A weekly Torah portion, from the book of Bamidbar (Numbers), 19:1-22:1.

5. The list includes rules concerning gleaning-- the margins of the fields, and of portions of the crops that are forgotten or missed at harvest, which are required to be left in the fields for poor people.
6. Chofetz Chaim [spelling varies]. A name given to Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933), after the title of his book.
7. *keyn eynore*, “[may] no evil eye [befall him]” is said before praising someone or describing someone’s good fortune, so as not to tempt fate, or demons.
8. [DRF] Spellings of the transliterated Hebrew in this section are inconsistent. Simon was clear about his preference for the Ashkenazi pronunciation, especially when it came to the source texts. I do not know how these songs would have been sung at the time in a religious kibbutz in Israel, where the singers would have first learned these verses in a religious school. Nor do I know how Simon's readers would have 'heard' them when they read this section.
9. *Khnyok* (pl. khnyokes). A pejorative term for an over-observant or holier-than-thou religious person.
10. *Bokher* – A Yeshiva student or, more generally, a young man between age 13 and marriage.
11. Hashomer Hatzair was a Socialist-Zionist youth movement in Europe, and later their affiliated party in the Yishuv in Palestine.
12. Hebrew. The seven nations, or peoples.

## Chapter 16: Quiet, A People is Being Born

The days I spent in Holon were the happiest and brightest days of the three months that I was in the State of Israel. Holon is a new town three quarters of an hour's drive from Tel-Aviv. My childhood friend Beinush lived there. I had not seen him for thirty-eight years. I was a little bit frightened to meet him. I thought: *It's possible I will encounter an old man, preoccupied by his health problems and oblivious to the vibrant life around him.*

But instead, I encountered my old friend Beinush, with his same sharp mind, his same booming laugh, good humor, and thirst for learning as long ago. Like all Jewish intellectuals in Israel, he had not read any Yiddish since he came to the Land of Israel, a minimum of twenty-five years. But the Jewish tongue was still alive in his mouth and in that of his wife, who is also an old friend of mine. Their older daughter, Achsah, spoke a decent Yiddish. Their boy, Dan, who was eight years younger than their daughter, could barely understand Yiddish. Their son-in-law, Zhome, a tall official in the foreign ministry, spoke Yiddish fluently, if with a fair number of Hebraisms.

We would sit for hours and hours on the veranda, smoking, drinking tea and talking. The sands of Holon lay around us. Sand and more sand, as far as the eye could see. In the middle of the sand there was a narrow pass, paved...

p. 174

with asphalt, with charming, white, one-story houses built on both sides. Next to the bungalows were vegetable gardens, flowerbeds and shade trees. Beyond the fences was a deep, sandy desert. It was a true spiritual pleasure to spend time talking with the family. They had a thorough knowledge Jewish life in Israel, so they were well-oriented to all my questions. They were passionate Zionists, who disavowed the exile. However, they understood me and accepted my doubts and my displeasure. They did not deny a lot of my accusations or try to minimize the negatives. They were honest and understanding opponents, but they often considered my negatives to be positive developments.

"Why are you angry," my friend Beinush good-naturedly answered me, "when we say: *A people is being born?*"<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the Jews were a people before Europeans knew they were supposed to wear pants. But over the span of two thousand years we were an unnatural people, a people that satisfied itself with a minimum connection between its citizens and its national life. Now, after the founding of the State of Israel, we have become a normal people. In this category, only now is a people being born.

"No, we do not accept that today Jews can also be a people in *goles*. Once, when religion played a role, it could have been imagined. Now, when religion has stopped being the main factor in life, Jews cannot consider themselves a people outside of the State of Israel. Jewish life has stopped being creative in exile. By creative, I do not mean writing books or painting paintings. There is a deeper creativity: To stake your own kind of life. In America, which is now the fortress of Jewish life, Jewish culture, tradition, and customs, you have completely renounced the shtetl. Here, we have completely revived the shtetl once again. You live together with your [non-

Jewish] neighbors, not just physically but also spiritually. Your whole Jewish life has become an add-on, a supplement. It's not for nothing that you have supplemental schools. Your day-to-day life must be emptied out of Jewish content. Then, too, your communal life is bloodless and impoverished. If not for the State of Israel, you would not have anything to do.

“Why haven't our kibbutzim and workers' collectives influenced the Jews in America and in the rest of the world the way Hasidism influenced Jewish life? The answer may seem...

p. 175

terrible to you. There is no one to influence. Your life in goles is such that you want an easy Judaism, a Judaism that does not disturb the comfort of the individual. Simply put, the human material in goles is not suitable. The Jewish person has lost his Jewish self.

“You, like all Jews who live a secular life, ought to be in seventh heaven when you come to our Jewish towns here. Holon, Ra'Anana, Kfar Saba, Rehovot, Petah Tikva – these are the old shtetls, but rebuilt and spiritually renewed. Gone are the idlers, the strictures of Shabbes and the holidays. The young do not tear themselves free to live a foreign life, and the fear of the Goy is gone. The kheyder, the one-room schoolhouse, has been transformed into a modern school. No more whip and no more suffocating little rooms. That is what we dreamed of.

“It does not solve the question of Judaism, nor the Jewish Question?<sup>2</sup> For you in goles, it actually doesn't. For us, though, it solves both questions. A people in its own land does not have to have a justification for its existence. And here we will also have no Judaism Question. Give up the idea that the Jews are a world people. Accept that our dispersal is a curse, and you will solve both questions. A part of the people will come to us, and the rest will disappear. Under normal conditions they will disappear spiritually and assimilate. If there is a tragedy, they will be annihilated.

“Of course, today the State of Israel is living off the financial support of the diaspora. The sudden disappearance of the diaspora would be a catastrophe for the Jewish community here. But it is not immanent. The slow decline of the diaspora helps us. You are spiritual, economic, and physical fertilizer for us (the word he used was *zobel*).

“Your complaints against Hebrew and especially against the Sephardic pronunciation are fully justified. This divides us from *klal-Yisroyl* [the unity of the whole Jewish people], from the Yiddish speaking portion and from those who understand Ashkenazi Hebrew. But, first of all, we do believe in the unity of the Jewish people. Second, we wish to intentionally distance ourselves from everything that smacks of goles. Third, the people has not wanted Yiddish and does not want to maintain it now either. And, finally, why haven't you established a Yiddish-speaking generation in America, which is as stubbornly determined as we are with Hebrew here? If there were such a generation, we would have to take it into account. Now, though – remember! We old Jews are not going to be here for long.

p. 176

“It is a loss to the people to shrink ourselves onto a small Jewish piece of land? Agreed. And if Jewish life in goles was creative, gushing with Jewish life, your complaint would make sense. But you in goles are declining. We believe that your supplemental Judaism is of little value now, and will be of less and less value. You are still feeding off the shtetl. You are still living on scraps. Your children, who are already fairly emptied out, will soon not even have any scraps. We will save what can be saved. It’s a little bit funny when a beggar acts like a big shot. You, when you talk about Jewish continuity, are in that category.”

My friend Beinush is a math teacher and, even in the summer, he is busy in the afternoons, giving private lessons. The students come to him every hour and a half. I found both his attire and his whole demeanor during these lessons odd. He would dress just in “khaki” shorts and an undershirt, and go barefoot. It shocked me. But that is the custom there, and no one looks askance at such details. The windows are always open there. I would sit on the porch and listen to the lessons. His voice is loud, and his explanations are very clear. He was always enthusiastic. I would watch him through the open window. He seldom sat, but would constantly walk around the room, explaining the hardest geometry problems and even trigonometry by heart in a fast, clear Hebrew. At first, it was hard for me to follow the Hebrew. Once I got used to it, I was often captivated by his wonderful explanations.

His son-in-law knew that his father-in-law was busy in the afternoons and, for my benefit, would come home earlier than usual from the foreign ministry. He and his wife had come to the Land of Israel very young. They both considered themselves to be Sabras. They were in the Palmach for years.

Both were exceptionally well-informed concerning the course of the recent war. An uncle of theirs, my friend’s wife’s brother, was one of the most important military leaders. When I left the shtetl, he had been a ten- or eleven-year-old boy. He came to Israel when he was twenty. He became a kibbutznik, and took an interest in military problems. I gather from...

p. 177

several sources that he had been the “brains” of the strategic staff. He was killed by chance during the last days of the war. Even though he was not famous among the general public, the newspapers were full of the news of his death. I read a lot about him at the time, but I never connected the deceased Mr. Glouberman with Shloyme the Menaker’s<sup>3</sup> youngest son. Zhome, my friend’s son-in-law, was Glouberman’s right hand. Achsah, Zhome’s wife, also had military experience.

In the afternoons, we would often lie on the grass as a trio, smoking and talking. I was surprised that such young people, who had been in the army for so many years, had enough time to read and study, and to be so well informed.

They were just as extreme Zionists as my friend Beinush. But he, at least, had still known the goles. They did not know any other life outside of the Land of Israel. Therefore, they spoke in less abstract terms. They disputed my arguments with their experiences, not with theoretical arguments.



The young man spoke with a strange calm:

“I understand you very well. You look at us Jews differently than we see ourselves here. You see Jews as a world people, spread across the four corners of the world (b'arba kanfot ha'aretz), and for you Israel is – another Jewish community. You complain to us that we have renounced the established Jewish way of abstract justice. But forget the abstract Jewish People for now. Imagine that you are not in America, where you live peacefully and neither your life nor the lives of your family are in danger. Imagine that you are here as I was eight or ten years ago and you are working with my uncle in a secret room. The room must be secret, because we are surrounded by two enemies: The old long-settled population and an imperial power that rules the country.

“We know that it will come to a decisive war. We are preparing ourselves. First we began to map out the country. We made a topographic map of every little corner, of every little hill, valley, and stone and everything was recorded. Every Arab village was researched down to the smallest detail.

p. 178

“We began to calculate: For the roads to our settlements to be secured, we have to take this and that village, we must have control over these and those hills. These roads must be in our hands. We had few weapons and less ammunition. There were not enough people. So we had to figure out what we could do with what we had.

“My uncle calculated every move, every movement, every future battle. We could take this village or that one with twenty-five people. For that one, twenty will be enough. This hill can be held by fifty people.

“We young ones used to haggle with him: *We need to have fifty more men. If not...* I remember how my uncle would answer us with a bitter smile:

*“Correct. You are correct. We would lose a lot fewer casualties if we had another ten thousand young people and artillery and heavy machine-guns. It would be even better if we had an air force. But we do not have all these things. So for this bit of work I listed here, we can spare no more than twenty-two people.*

“We worked out dozens of plans, and every plan had three alternative plans. When war broke out with the Arabs, we used my uncles plans, often without any alterations. When we sent a group of boys and girls in to take a village or a hill, we said:

*“You are twenty in number. Here, this is your ammunition. You need to take this or that village. You need to take this or that hill.* And they knew what that meant: Don't return empty handed. Accept that not everyone will come back. They went. They took it. A lot of them did not return. Often a whole group was lost.

“So, you complain that it is not right to conquer a country by force. You complain that, from the first, we came here intending to become the majority in the country, and that means by conquest if necessary. OK, let’s say you are right. And what should we have said to the Arabs during the...

p. 179

war: Go ahead and drive us into the ocean? Come and cut us into pieces?

“Your complaints about Yiddish are complaints for my father-in-law. We have enough problems here without two languages. Starting Yiddish schools here is just what we need. We already have four or five kinds of schools as it is. Everyone has schools – the orthodox, the ordinary Zionists, the Mapai and the Mapam. We have no national public school system, but at least all our schools are in the same language. Now if we just found some Yiddish schools, our joy will be complete.

“The Arab question. If we accepted the concept of justice in the abstract and invited them back in, then there would truly be chaos. Their k’romim [vineyards] have withered, and their orchards, after a year without watering, are worthless. Some of their houses are occupied and the rest are ruined. It is a lot easier to settle the Arabs among the Arab nations, than to settle them among us.

“Do not be angry at me if I speak too sharply. But you have seen what a hard life we live here. If you in America lived as hard a life as we do here, you would easily be able to remake your own lives as we have done here. But you do not have the strength to do it. You have only enough strength to give money. You see the abyss of assimilation and you want us to save you. For the Yiddishists we are supposed to revive Yiddish, for the orthodox, renew orthodoxy, for the ethicists, uphold Jewish ethics. We have our own worries. We need to secure ourselves strategically with the wider population. We need to strengthen our economy. We need to settle the land. We have it hard enough ourselves. We want to use your strength for us. It’s a question of who will use whom. I think we will win. First, we are better organized, and second, we are ready to sacrifice. You, in goles, are sentenced to be merely fertilizer for the State of Israel. There's no help for it.”

We were lying on the grass, next to a flowering tree. Opposite us, through the bushes, you could see the empty stretch of deep sand. Piles of cut branches and small, uprooted trees were heaped right next to the paved road. Zyome gestured towards them.

“Look how busy we are. Take Holon, for example. A few short years ago, it was a wasteland here. Sand. Sand like on the shore of an ocean where...

p. 180

no human foot stepped for hundreds of years. We came and bought the wasteland for good money. The Arabs shrugged their shoulders: *The Jews have gone crazy*. But we knew what we were doing. We wanted a large territory for suburbs near Tel-Aviv. Here on the sand, we built two suburbs: Holon A, and Holon B, and we made a whole amusement park near the beach. Before the war, the sands were an ideal place to test our homemade weapons.

But it is never an easy matter to build in the Land of Israel. After being here for a couple of years, we came to understand that sand is not so easy to tame. Our little gardens, our trees and our houses were getting damaged by the sand. Then we began planting parks. But we learned that it is not easy to plant parks on sand. You plant those trees and before they can grow, they are damaged. So we learned that we needed to bury thick, dead branches next to the young trees, in order to protect them. This costs money and takes time. We don't have money to spare, and the time is needed for hundreds of other things. But we must have suburbs of Tel-Aviv. Do you understand?

That night we sat on the veranda. After dinner, the young couple and their boy went off to see a film. The three of us old people stayed, sitting and chatting. We talked about bygone years:

"Remember, Shloyme, that summer afternoon in the woods, deep in Dubnik, when we made a hut out of branches and lay there the whole day? That afternoon, we learned *Meyse Midber*<sup>4</sup>, by Chaim Nachman Bialik, by heart."

I remembered, and for fun I began reciting. I recited three or four lines and then broke off. Beinush picked up and went further, but he, too, stopped after a few lines. A young voice from the neighboring house began quoting the next lines. We listened for a while. Then Beinush called out:

"Hey, Zevulin, you are tricking us! You are reading from a book!"

The young man came out onto his veranda, which was six feet away from ours, and said, earnestly:

p. 181

"I know the whole thing by heart. Do you want to hear it?"

"OK, I believe you."

"But the American," the boy pointed to me, "quoted the poem like a foreigner, like a goy who has studied Hebrew."

Beinush laughed.

"Fool. When a goy learns Hebrew, he learns the right pronunciation. But a Jew who knows Hebrew from birth does not talk like a Sabra."

The boy's words interrupted our happiness. It was a beautiful moonlit night. To the left of us were the dead branches, buried in the sand next to the young trees, looking like tall clumps of grass. To the right was an ocean of sand, naked without a speck, shining its emptiness into the night.

Beinush spoke quietly, which was very unusual for him:

“I know that it’s very hard here for you. You don’t have it so good. Here you have come to Yidn-land, and you do not feel like you are at home. People treat you like a foreigner. You, who are so deeply rooted in Jewish life are called: Goles-Yid, American Jew with a bad Hebrew accent. People are constantly threatening you with a Hitler. But you yourself have said that the State of Israel is a rupture in Jewish history. You see different Jews here than you are used to seeing. Jews rooted in their own country, Jews who hold a rifle in their hands. Jews who do not rely on mercy; not on the mercy of the nations, not on the mercy of history, and not on the mercy of God, but on themselves. Believe me, we too are often uncomfortable with a lot of things. But since when has an old Jew been completely satisfied?

“Yes, a people is being born! It’s a little bit odd, even uncomfortable, to say about us Jews. But it’s true nevertheless. A completely new and different Jewish people will emerge. A lot depends on you and those like you in goles. If you succeed there in drawing the thread of old Yiddishkayt farther forward, and if the goyim do not become worse evildoers than they are now, then the young, new Jewish people will not be so proud, so full of chutzpah, and so different. But if you do not succeed – and I, as an old...

p. 182

Zionist, believe you will not succeed in altering the goles – then I say to you: Make peace with your fate. Do not yell. It will not help you. Shh. Be quiet. A new people is being born!”

I stood up, put my hand on his shoulder and said:

“You know, Beinush, when you were young, you wrote poetry. In your old age you became a mathematician. But you still have the vitality of a poet in you.”

The young group came back from the movie. They saw how we were sitting quietly and Zyome began to tease us.

“Well look how the old folk sit daydreaming. Probably remembering when they were young and had a full heads of hair.”

Our hostess served tea. Such were the days and nights that I spent in Holon.

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1. A 'folk'.

2. The “Jewish Question,” as it arose in political and social discussions and debates in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, is actually more than one question: As it was asked at the time, it meant, “What is the place of Jews in European society (in a historical period when Europe was experiencing new waves of nationalism)?” This in turn includes the questions: “How can Jews best achieve political emancipation?”, “Why is there so much anti-Semitism?”, and “How can it be eliminated?”

The “Judaism Question,” is the question of the continuity of Judaism in the modern world.

3. Menaker. Person who removes prohibited veins from meat to make it kosher.

4. *Meyse Midber*. "Metey Midbar" (The Dead in the Desert) in modern Hebrew. The long poem is based on a Talmudic legend of Hebrews freed from slavery in Egypt who died during the wandering in the desert. Not the fearful freed slaves who were depicted in the Torah, these were, in Bialik's version, warriors who defied the God who would not let them proceed to take the Holy Land.

## Chapter 17: On Account of a Miniscule Detail

The State of Israel is a free country. In the three months I was there, I went wherever I wanted, said what I wanted, gave my opinion when I was asked and when I was not asked, and it did not occur to anyone to say: "Do not interfere, it is none of your business, you are a foreigner." Often I played dumb and went into places where I was not supposed to go, and no one asked me for any identification. There is complete freedom of movement and of the press there. The citizen is in charge. His rights are self-evident. I often considered that the government holds the reins too loosely. There is so much freedom there, that it seemed to me that it would be easy for our enemies to disguise themselves as Jews and cause big problems. No one is suspicious of anyone. All the doors are open and the gates unlocked.

But the Israel citizen is not an indifferent or negligent person when it comes to ideas, faith, or ideology. Everyone is a party member, who is sure that only he is privy to the whole truth, and that only his party knows how to solve all the problems in the Jewish community in Israel and in the diaspora. Often the lines of demarcation between the parties are vague, practically imperceptible. Yet each party has its daily newspaper and its organization, and will not...

p. 184

unite with anyone by any means, not even with another party that has the same ideology.

One example: No matter how hard I struggled to understand the difference between the Mapai and the Mapam, I was unable to learn the distinction. Both are socialist. Both are secular. Both are for austerity. Both are against letting the Arabs back in. Both orient themselves towards the kibbutzim. Both fought with extraordinary courage during the war. Both were originally in favor of working cooperatively with the Arabs. Both are now for Hebrew as the national language in the State of Israel, and in goles. More important still, is that both parties are composed of the same element of Jews – Western European Jews who were raised on socialism and on modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. The leaders of both parties were educated in the Yeshiva and on the worker's "bursar". Nevertheless, they are opposed to each other.

They say that the basic principle that divides the two is that the Mapam orients itself toward Soviet Russia and the Mapai towards the West. But this is completely untrue. The Mapamnicks are not Stalinists. They maintain that the kibbutz is a big slap in the face of Russian Communism. In whatever Mapam kibbutz I was in, I heard them say over and over that in Soviet Russia there is socialism with a whip, which is no socialism at all, but in the State of Israel the kibbutz is a free socialist society, which a member can leave whenever he wants. And the Mapainiks are no opponents of Soviet Russia. They just sought a loan from Russia. But the Russians did not even answer them. The Mapamnicks know that they would have the same luck with the Soviets that the Mapainiks had. Everyone in the State of Israel knows that the Soviets will never work together cooperatively with anyone else. Soviet Russia demands obedience without conditions. No one in the Sate of Israel will agree to that, the Mapamnicks included. Only the Communists would accept such an arrangement.

What is especially glaring is that, whether the Mapai or whether the Mapam, they live on Uncle Sam's account. I am not talking about the machines and other necessities that were sent from America on the balance sheet of the hundred million dollar loan, but that simply without the money from American Jews, both...

p. 185

parties would be bankrupt. The Mapam's members cannot even support their own newspaper. In the meantime, I have still not heard the Mapam say it is going to refuse to take money from capitalist America.

But if you read the party papers, you would think that God knows what kind of gulf lies between the Mapai and the Mapam.

Ten Hebrew daily newspapers are printed in the State of Israel. Eight of them are party newspapers. The press runs at a loss of tens of thousands of pounds. It does not occur to anyone that this is a waste of money, time, and effort, all of which could be dedicated to better things. The reason is that every Israeli believes his party is a necessity; one does not compromise on principle. Yes, you often hear people say there are too many political parties in the Yishuv, but the person complaining always means the opposition: The other parties must not be so narrow-minded. They ought to dissolve and merge with *their* party, which has the correct solution to all their problems and knows how to bring about a complete redemption.

I think that this ferment of parties and these commitments to ideas and ideologies is not a flaw. Jews did not come to the Land of Israel to seek out their personal material fortunes. Those who were looking for that went to the Americas or immigrated to Western Europe. Nor did the Jews who came to the land of the patriarchs come just to found a Jewish state. There were other lands where that could have been done. The secular, modern Zionist was, in the end, linked to the idea of the Messiah after all, to the ideal of the end of days and the dream of God's Kingdom on earth. If you look more deeply into the Yishuv, it is clear to see that Jews came to found a government that would be an example for the whole world. Witness all the social experiments, the tens of thousands of idealists who gave up their personal happiness on behalf of the renaissance of the folk. There were very few among the inhabitants who did not "waste" a few years on a kibbutz or in some other group which gave their whole personal lives over to the good of the community. Even when the group supposedly worked only for its own subsistence, the people as a whole got more use from their work than the individuals got from the group.

p. 186

In the state of Israel, social experiments bubble and boil. On the surface, it looks as though the Jews have become hardened men of the world: They brag like gang members about injustice and unfair acts. There are Jews here who pride themselves on misdeeds and crimes, because this is how a normal people acts. But in essence, it is not true. When you talk long enough with any Jew in the Land of Israel, he will admit to you that the Jewish people has not toiled for two thousand years in order to achieve the great stature of some tiny Balkan state. Here I am not talking about the religious Jews, who believe that the Israel has a duty to live differently. But even on the

secular kibbutzim they mortify themselves in order to attain perfection. With each economic problem they take on, they do not just try to find a practical solution but always take care that the solution does not, heaven forbid, violate some social or ethical principle.

Still, it is hard for an outsider to look on while money, time, and hard labor are so often squandered on account of a minuscule detail<sup>1</sup>.

I witnessed a conflict over education. It was an argument “for the sake of heaven,<sup>2</sup>” but I have no way to reckon how much credit I should award the Yishuv for it.

There are officially three main types of schools in the State of Israel: The general public schools, the worker’s movement schools, and the orthodox schools. Until just recently, up until September, 1949, the parents paid tuition and the schools had to support themselves. The general public schools have had more students than the other school systems. But last summer, the Knesset approved a mandatory schooling law. They did not create a *unified national school system*, however. Instead, every school of no matter what type will be supported by the government, as long as they can enroll twenty-five students.

In Ra’Anana, there were two schools – the general public school, where nearly five hundred students learned, and the Orthodox school. The public school is the oldest school in the colony. It has a wonderful building with a fine garden, a park, and a playground; a large kitchen and an auditorium; in short, a truly...

p. 187

model school. Naturally, all the teachers are good socialists and are members of Histadrut.

One fine August day announcements appeared on the fenceposts of Ra’Anana, saying that on Shabbes a large gathering would take place, at which a representative of Histadrut would discuss the founding of a *zerem ovdim* (worker’s movement) school.

A good crowd came to the meeting. The representative of Histadrut spoke long and well. He emphasized that the worker’s movement school not only gave the children a socialist education, but also instilled a love of work and of social justice. Children will also learn to love the kibbutzim and absolutely will have a burning patriotism planted in their hearts, so that they will be ready to sacrifice for their fatherland and defend the yishuv with their blood. Above all, the child will be taught to distinguish between the rich and the poor, and will be prepared to defend their rights as workers. He finished up with a practical suggestion: Given that the great majority of the children who attend the general public school have parents who are members of Histadrut, the parents should sign a petition saying they want a worker's movement school and take over the current school in Ra’Anana, making it into a worker’s movement school.

A heated discussion began. The fathers and mothers argued that if they had wanted a worker’s movement school in Ra’Anana, they would have had one a long time ago. Up to now the public school has been supported by tuition and supported by the city budget. Who would have stopped them from founding a worker’s movement school in the first place? The Orthodox founded their



own school. The majority in Ra'Anana does not want party-run schools. The public school gives the children a good national education, and instills the love of work and a feeling for social justice in them. A great many of the graduates are in kibbutzim now. They listed some of their names. Defend the fatherland? Ra'Anana carried its share of the sacrifices just like any kibbutz. And, in general, how can they take over a finished school, that was built with so much effort by an entire community? Just skip the hard parts and take over a building with a free roof, a garden a park and a

p. 188

functioning water source. This is plain theft.

The speaker reacted by playing the victim,[\[3\]](#) answering with a rebuke:

“This meeting should be ashamed of itself. This is how socialists speak, members of Histadrut? We need a real socialist school, where the children will celebrate May Day and will not have to sit on the same bench where the rich children sit; like, for example, Rokach's children!”[\[4\]](#)

He was not left wanting for an answer:

“No one forces children to attend school on the First of May. Rich and poor children on the same bench? Where are you going to find capitalists here in Ra'Anana? All we have here are small farmers, moshavniks, and workers. Sure, there is a Rokach in Tel-Aviv, but what have they done to us here? And what does that possibly have to do with breaking up a school where over four hundred children are learning? We have a good staff of teachers who are running a model school. Founding another school will double the expenses – another building will have to be erected, another menahel (principle) hired. Where is the common sense in that?”

It was like talking to the wall. The meeting accepted a resolution that Ra'Anana needed a workers movement school, and a committee was formed to collect signatures.

In a week's time the committee brought over two hundred signatures. The community seethed. Where did they get so many signatures?

A week later an item appeared in the newspapers. Most of the signatures were gathered through deceit, and a lot of them were not even from parents but from students. A great number of the signatures were from Yemeni Jews who were, almost without exception, Orthodox. They send their children to the religious school and generally live far from the public school. Their young children would not be able to walk such a distance. So how did they get their signatures? Someone simply went to them and said, this is an official document, written by the government. The Yemini believe that one must follow the rules of the government in power.

But the labor agitators did not give in. They admitted that they had not supervised the collection of signatures,

p. 189

but what did that have to do with opening a worker's movement school? They will supervise the collection of signatures from now on. They will set up a volunteer committee at 'city hall'. It's OK, those interested in a worker's school can come to the committee to register.

Yes, they gathered over one hundred authentic signatures. A heated dispute began in the community. Where would the new school be? The labor organizers answered that they should divide the building in two—the students from the general public school would learn on the lower floor, and the students from the worker's school on the upper floor. What would they do about gymnastics? There was only one athletic field. So be it. They would figure something out.

I left before the new school opened, so I am not an eyewitness to what happened next. But here is the text of a letter that I received from Ra'Anana on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1950, written by a student of the school, my brother's boy<sup>5</sup>:

"The worker's movement school has opened, and the number of students is the same as the number of students in the public school (and maybe even more). Both schools have classes in the same building, but one has lessons in the morning and the other in the afternoon. On the tables where the students sit are two signs: "Worker's School" or "Public School". But the question will be resolved soon, and a new building will be built. Yours, Bentzyon."

Whether such principled inflexibility is good for the Yishuv, I leave it to the reader to judge.

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1. A kutsu shel yud (the tip of the letter 'yud'). That is, the thinnest bit of the smallest letter of the Jewish alphabet.

2. That is, people on both sides had the purest of motives.

3. [translators note] The phrase 'playing the victim' is anachronistic here, but I know of no English equivalent for the Yiddish idiom *kozak-hanigzl*, "a wronged Cossack [who acts as though he is the one being robbed]." According to my friend Itamar, this idiom dates all the way back to Chmelnitski's time. If so, it contains a second layer of meaning. The Cossacks were, in fact, wronged, but that did not justify them taking it out on the Jews.

4. Israel Rokach (1896-1959), then mayor of Tel Aviv.

5. The book here gives the original of the letter in Hebrew, followed by the author's translation into Yiddish.

## Chapter 18: Peasants from the Galilee and the Valley

I was walking the streets of Tel-Aviv without any particular purpose or goal. I wanted to soak up the commotion, the noise, the pleasure and sound of this exclusively Jewish city. I counted the cafés, the newspaper kiosks (which also sold magazines and light reading), and the bookstores. I read the posters on the round poles that had been specially installed for the purpose. I looked everywhere for a 'bar', as we call them in America, and did not find one. I counted and tallied how many Jews spoke Hebrew, how many spoke Yiddish, and how many other languages.

It was a hot day, but the streets were full and noisy, and I strolled with my hands in my pockets, walking slowly, taking my time and trying not to miss the slightest detail.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder and heard a happy voice calling out: "Would you believe it! I was getting ready to go see you in Ra'Anana and here you are! Walking around with you hands in your pockets just like that in Tel-Aviv."

I turned and saw Chaim from Afikim, the procurer from the kibbutz where I had spent a weekend. I embraced him and asked:

"Why did you want to come to Ra'Anana?"

"Yes, you forgot already," he gestured,

p. 191

"we agreed in Afikim that you would take back a present for my mother-in-law in America. I bought a Hannukah menorah, a really special one, I tell you. So, I was thinking I would go to Ra'Anana and give you the present. And now, here you are. You have spared me the effort."

"Where is the menorah?"

"In the Shuk Tnuva (in the market of the cooperative)," he answered. "Come with me and you can see the main produce market and the other wholesale markets. They are actually not as big as your Fulton Street Market in New York. But still, you cannot simply dismiss what we do possess. Meanwhile, you can see the representatives of all the kibbutzim in the Galilee, Jordan Valley and Jezereel Valley. Then, when we are done we can go into a *misada*, a restaurant, to grab a bite and talk."

I went with him. Chaim was loaded with packages and bags. He held a long, rubber garden hose under his right arm. Over his shoulder, he had thrown a package of wire wound into a hoop. He held a flat package in his right hand, apparently some kind of fabric, chintz or cotton cloth. He held a large doll under his armpit.

I tried to take one of his packages, but he would not let anything out of his hands.

"No matter, I am used to carrying packages," he told me.

We came to a street consisting solely of wholesale markets. The largest of them was Tnuva. We went inside. There was a table with a telephone near me. A young, dark black man sat at the table. He greeted Chaim and me, and Chaim joked:

“He is the only Jew here who does not speak Yiddish, and if we want to say something that he does not understand, we should speak Yiddish to each other.”

The young man smiled with a full mouth of white teeth, and said:

p. 192

“I meyvin Yiddish now. Not like a goles Yehudi, but meyvin good.”

Chaim gave him a slap on the shoulder:

“You are going to make something of yourself, and speak Yiddish like an American boytchikl.” Then, in Hebrew, “Has the kibbutz phoned?”

“Lo (no),” the young Yemini answered.

“If so, we have it good,” Chaim turned to me. “I have the whole half-day free.”

He went into a corner of the market and set out his bundles. There was a stiff piece of cardboard on each package with the name of the kibbutz. The truck driver who would be driving to the kibbutz that afternoon took the packages.

The representatives of the kibbutzim began to arrive, each of them laden with packages. The young man at the door greeted each one by his first name, and gave many of them instructions from their kibbutzim.

A good number of people gathered together. Chaim took out a small package, and showed the crowd the menorah that he was sending to his mother-in-law in America with this American right here.

It was a truly fine menorah-lamp. I asked Chaim:

“So, tell me. It looks to me like this menorah is worth at least six pounds. A good sum for a present. So, Reb Chaim, where does a kibbutznik get so much money for a present?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“It never ends with you. No matter how much I talked with you in Afikim, you cannot grasp that the kibbutz is not a boss over its workers, that it does not try to squeeze as much as it can out of them, the way an employer does.

“The kibbutz is a family. A family takes care of its members. My wife and I were in America for a full year. My mother-in-law and brothers-in-law provided us with the best of everything. Now we have an opportunity to send them a present. So, we came to the kibbutz, to the committee that deals with such matters, and explained it to them. We got...

p.193

enough money for a lovely present. It is the kibbutz's responsibility to provide for such things, just as it is responsible to support guests when they come to stay on a kibbutz.

I had some more questions. For example, I was very curious to know if a less important member than Chaim would have gotten six pounds for a present. But I controlled myself, because the group was absorbed in looking at the beautiful menorah, and I did not want to disturb them. A kibbutznik with a large lock of black hair and a pair of big, blue eyes remarked:

“Poor Channukah menorah. It will not hear a blessing over the candles.”

Chaim answered him sharply. “Well look at him! Suddenly he is a holy man, who needs a blessing over Channukah candles.”

People laughed, and began hurrying Chaim up.

“Enough dilly-dallying. Let's go eat.”

Chaim turned to me as he began packing away the Channukah menorah:

“You are my guest. Come eat with us. The kibbutz will pay.

We went out into the bright outdoors. I stopped on the steps of the wholesale market and watched them walk. Calm, heavy, measured steps. There was no hint of any anxious, urban pace. I walked behind them and listened to their conversation. They spoke about the price of grapes, tomatoes, green peppers and cucumbers. Then they talked about water, about plows, trucks, livestock and chicken coops.

We went past several fine cafés. I was dying to go into a cool, roomy café, but they did not stop until we arrived at a restaurant in a long, narrow space. The large picture window was not covered with any curtain, and it looked hot and stuffy inside. It was a *misada sug aleph*, a “one-star” restaurant.

The host put three tables together to make one long table and we sat down around it. They looked the menu over thoroughly, talked about each dish, and then ordered...

p. 194

the meal. I ordered a sandwich and an iced coffee. A kibbutznik joked:

“Are you trying to save Afikim a few pennies?”

I told them that in America the main meal is eaten in the evening and, anyway, how can anyone eat such a heavy meal in this heat? They laughed.

“It’s fine. Just serve the meal. We can handle it. Do you think our hands are too dainty for such work?”

We ate without talking. When we were done eating, the host came to the table and asked:

“What do you think about dessert?”

The group answered that they were full.

“But it comes with the meal today,” said the host.

“OK, if it’s coming to us, then bring it. We won’t leave it unfinished.”

When the meal was done, the host brought us the bill. Each of them carefully looked it over the numbers on his slip of paper, comparing the prices on the bill to the government prices that were printed on a poster that hung on the wall. After everyone had calculated the bill for himself and determined that there was no mistake, they paid.

The host was distressed. He shook his head and said to them:

“OK, suppose you do not trust me. I am, after all, a capitalist, an exploiter. But at least admit that I have some sense. I know that one doesn’t start up with kibbutzniks. You keep a watchful eye on the whole world. Everyone knows about your conscience.”

One of the kibbutzniks grumbled to himself:

“Someone has to keep watch. I will not hurt anyone to know that the world is not a free-for-all.”

I said good-bye to the group and Chaim and I went off for a walk. We visited old acquaintances from back home, and then late in the afternoon we went out to a café, sat over a cup of tea and talked.

p. 195

Before we parted, he asked me, “So, how do you like our kibbutzniks?”

I answered him. “You know, Chaim, our history tells us that in the time of Caligula, shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple, the crazy emperor ordered his procurator in Israel to erect his statue, a marble figure of the emperor, in the Temple. Caligula considered himself to

be a God. Peasants from the Galilee and from every corner of the land of Israel headed off to the procurator in Akko [Acre]. Thousands and thousands of peasants left their fields in the middle of harvest time and besieged the Roman delegate's palace, and they called out:

*“Do what you want with us. Kill us all, but do not desecrate the Temple!”*

“And so, I see, maybe in the not-so-distant future, when it comes to a turning point, you, the Jewish peasants from the Galilee, from the Jordan Valley, and the Jezreel Valley will show yourselves. You will come with your steady tread and immovable calm, and you will not allow an injustice to be done. Like our ancestors, you too will leave your mark on world history. I see the first signs and indicators in the kibbutzim now: You have practically taken on an ascetic lifestyle, or at least a life without luxuries. You have also succeeded as a family of human beings, liberating yourselves to a fair degree from the daily routine of merely providing for your own family. You have placed the people as a whole in the center of your own lives. Now that the people has transformed itself into a nation-state, you want a nation-state that embodies your principles. *Ve'al kulem*, above all, you have adopted the justice of the prophets. It's true, in the meantime you are aiming it at yourselves... but still, you have barred exploitation from your economic life. I believe that everything you have done is a consequence of a greater social reform movement. You did not come to the Land of Israel merely to find personal happiness and security; I believe that you wanted even more than to found an independent Jewish state. You came to realize God's Kingdom on Earth, to bring redemption to the whole world, as our fathers and grandfathers dreamed of in the time of the ingathering of the People Israel.

“Yes,” I did not allow him to interrupt me, “I know that you deny it. You think of yourselves as secularists, as kosher Marxists. But I am telling...”

p. 196

you, you are fooling yourselves. Your heart does not reveal to your own mouth what it is about. It is a secret from yourself. But your deeds give you away.”

He looked at me intently for a while, then laughed. He answered me:

“If I told people in the kibbutz what you said, they would also laugh at you as a romantic Goleš-Yid. But in our hearts we agree with you. If not, then why is the whole business worth the trouble? Wandering the world for two thousand years, and then coming here and going through all the tortures of hell in order to be peasants? But it would be worth all of it to save the world. So, how did you say it? The heart does not reveal itself even to the mouth. You as a guest noticed it right away.”

Chaim and your fellow peasants from the Galilee and the Valley, I hope we are not disappointed by your deeds!

# Chapter 19: Without Tears

For someone who did not live in Israel during the war, it could seem as though the whole fight between the Jews and the seven Arab nations was nothing more than a combat between small armies over a limited area of land. But when you visit the State of Israel even for a short time, you soon grasp that this was a total war involving the lives of around three-quarters of a million Jews. If the Arabs, heaven forbid, had won, the fate of these Jews in the State of Israel would have been the same as the fate of the Jews in Europe under Hitler's rule.

The victory of the Jews over the Arabs was so large and independence came so unexpectedly, that it is hard for the Jews to get used to the thought of an independent state of their own, without an Arab majority. They do not believe it. In the Yishuv, I very often heard:

“Just now English were in total control here and the roads were not safe because of the scoundrels, the Arabs, and only a few months later, we became the ones in charge over our own fate.”

Jews still lack experience in governing a country. I witnessed a lot of funny incidents in the State of Israel. The *pokidim*, officials, who had...

p. 198

not been officials under English rule, still do not accept that they are actually government officials and have authority.

Both government experience and skill are lacking. The military parade that was conducted in August was supposed to have taken place at the beginning of May, but the parade was postponed after it began. Neither the military nor the civilian police could succeed in clearing a path among the onlookers for the soldiers to parade with their weapons.

The Jews are proud of having won independence, and boast about how their army fought in the war. But at every turn you also hear them sigh, and finish up by saying, “If only we did not need such heroism.”

Here the people show a mixture of the old deeply-rooted Jewish antipathy to *yevonim*,<sup>1</sup> to government officials, and to rulers in general, and pride in their own nation-state and respect for official people.

It is interesting that when military parade was finally conducted in August, its official purpose was not just to show off the strength and preparedness of the army. The government linked it to Herzl's and Bialik's yortsayts<sup>2</sup>, and to bringing Herzl's remains from exile in the time of independence. But, in the end, the military parade drowned everything else out. On that day, the speakers spoke only about the army and Bialik's yortsayt was set aside. The ceremony around Herzl's casket also took place a little later that month. Pointed articles about the jumble were printed in the Israeli press. It seemed to me that it was not done out of confusion, but simply that



Jews could not initially bring themselves to organize a military parade just for the sake of a parade, or to show the greatness and heroism of the army. But having had a taste of a parade, they found they liked it.

I saw a good example of Jewish reticence with respect to patriotism when I witnessed a patriotic event in Ra'Anana. The community had made a plan to erect a monument. But the public was not called to gather just for a patriotic commemoration, using the occasion to raise the necessary funds. Instead, the gathering for the monument was linked to the interment of Herzl's remains.

p. 199

When Herzl's remains were brought to the State of Israel, the government put out a call to every community, moshav, kibbutz, and town in the country, for every settlement to send a delegation to Jerusalem with a little bag of soil. The casket of that dreamer from the diaspora would be covered with this soil taken from every settlement in the country.

The community of Ra'Anana called a meeting for all its residents: "That evening will also include a memorial for the fallen soldiers and money will be collected for the monument. A ceremony will be conducted to fill the bag with soil. Finally, a delegation will be chosen to attend Herzl's burial, which will take place in Jerusalem."

A good crowd came out for the evening, but not a huge one. It was a very strange patriotic event. No one had taken the trouble to prepare a program. It could very well be that no one knew what kind of a program they should prepare. Here were our Jews who had come from Eastern Europe, and it apparently did not occur to them to arrange for a band to play patriotic songs, or a children's choir, or to have a slate of speakers to give patriotic speeches. There were no representatives of any of the political parties, nor were there any high government officials to be seen. The secretary of the public school announced in a monotone: "Our esteemed rabbi will speak about the subject of the day."

The rabbi stood up and gave a talk that was part modern-day speech, part Talmudic interpretation and sermonizing. One memory stays with me. He said there is a midrash that the Jews in the time of the return to Zion [from Babylonia] were sinful, and that therefore they did not have the merit to conquer the land by force. They were not qualified to wage a war, and so instead God sent a pious king, who gave them the land without bloodshed. But our generation, like the generation of Joshua son of Nun, occupies a higher level, and had the merit to conquer the land by the sword.

Someone whispered in my ear: "Even if there is such an exquisite midrash, he did not need to bring it up. Spilling blood is spilling blood."

After the sermon the school principal stood up and...

p. 200

explained that the bag of earth would be taken from the earth around the "mother tree", the first tree that was planted in Ra'Anana.

The crowd positioned itself around the thick and luxuriant tree and the rabbi took a little bit of dirt with a spoon and poured it into the little blue and white cloth bag. Then he called out names of the oldest residents of Ra'Anana. After them, names were called of the fathers and mothers of the fallen soldiers. Each was asked not to take too much earth in the spoon, because the mourners were many and the bag was small (Fifty souls had fallen in Ra'Anana).

When the earth ceremony was done, the crowd stood on line and everyone each one signed a pledge for a contribution to the monument. The donor received a printed receipt, that read as follows: "This witnesses and certifies that so- and so- has contributed this sum as a brick in erecting the memorial to the fifty souls from Ra'Anana who fell in the war of liberation." Signed: "Security Advisory Board and City Administration of Ra'Anana".

When it was finished, people stood and sang the Hatikvah. Among the usual singing of the crowd, voices full of quavering and tears rang out. I looked around to see where these voices came from and saw a group of women who stood separately: The mothers of the fallen soldiers were singing. The old familiar tune sounded as though I was hearing it for the first time in my life. When the last two lines were repeated:

*Lih'yot am chofshi b'artseinu  
Eretz Tsiyon v'Yerushalayim<sup>3</sup>*

I am not ashamed to tell you that tears began to catch in my throat. I turned away. When I stole a look back at the singing mothers, I saw that their eyes were dry, though their lips trembled.

People dispersed quickly and quietly. I arrived at my brother's house, sat down on the veranda, and stayed there, thinking, late into the night. No, the patriotic event did not reflect the...

p. 201

passionate bond between the Jewish people and the land of their ancestors. I heard a kind of hint in the singing of the mothers, but what do the parents of fallen soldiers truly think? I found out by happenstance.

A couple of days before I left the State of Israel, a fifteen-year-old boy came to me with a note in Hebrew from his mother, who lived not far from Ramat Gan. In the note she wrote that she wanted me to come to see her for the sake of bygone years. She wanted me to have a look at her son. She cannot even imagine that Shloymke (that is how they called me in the town of my birth) could be in Israel without seeing her son.

The name that was signed at the bottom was unfamiliar to me, and the wording of the note, "have a look at her son", and, "without seeing her son," was perplexing. I went out to the chicken coops, where my brother was working, and showed him the note. He told me that the note was from Hannah the Redhead, a long ago neighbor of ours from our town. I immediately remembered who she is. She was a year or two older than me and was a fanatical Zionist. Her father had been a tanner. Yes, my brother said, that is her. It would be a great mitzvah for me to go to see her. Her son was killed. He was a very talented boy, eighteen years old. He was in the

Palmach, and he fell into Arab hands, and afterwards he was found, cut to pieces. Obviously, they did not show his mother the body, but she knows about it. He said I have to be very careful when I talk to her; since her boy was killed she is still a little bit confused. Her younger son, Hershl-Tsvi is the boy who brought the note.

I went off with the boy. I found her in a typical moshav house with three rooms. She was sitting on the veranda with two neighbors. I recognized her right away. Her red hair had not gone completely gray.

She gave me her hand, turned to her neighbors and in a calm tone said to them: "This is Shloymke. He came all the way from America to look at my Nathan." Then she asked me, "Do you want to see him now, or after you have something to eat?"

p. 202

I feigned ignorance. "I do not want to eat. I am curious to meet your Nathan. Where is he?"

"Come," she gestured to me, "he has a whole room to himself. His friends have sent flowers from the Galilee, and ears of grain from the Jordan Valley. I have set them out for him."

Her words sent a shiver up my spine, and I followed her with a heavy heart. We went into the room. A large picture of him, set in a finely carved frame, stood on a small table. I looked at the picture. Still, really a child. A vase with dried flowers stood on the table next to the picture. A bundle of wheat sheaves lay next to the vase.

She pointed to a bookcase. "These are his books and his things are hanging in the closet." She chuckled quietly. "He loved to spruce himself up like a girl. He resembled my brother Aaron David. I've kept his clothes, his books, and his shoes. You know, Shloyme, I often like to sit here and look at him. He was never a talker, and when I sit here and look at him, here he is. His clothes smell like him."

I could not take my eyes off her. Hearing her speak with such calm and ease, that an uncanny dread came over me. I was afraid something in her might suddenly burst. I thought, *Someone has to take her out of the room.* I said to her, "I am thirsty. Come, Hannah, give me a cold drink. You can tell me about him sitting at the table."

As she went to leave the room, she said to me, "It won't help you. I am not letting you go until you eat something. That would be a fine thing, for you to come all the way from America and leave hungry."

I chewed my food patiently and she talked.

"He came to me and said, 'Momma, I got into the Palmach' I said, 'You are not even seventeen years old. You should still be in school.' He answered me, 'Of course I should be in school, but if the Arabs win, there will be nowhere to learn and no one to teach me. We will be driven into the sea.' You understand, Shloyme, he was wise beyond his years. So I said..."

p. 203

to him, 'But you are too young, nonetheless. You are not fit to be in the Palmach.' He answered me, 'Doctors have examined me. They say that I am fit. Who knows better?' So, I said to him, 'And if worst happens?' And he answered me as an adult. 'I'll tell you.' he said, 'You will suffer. As for me, I do not want to die young, either.' Done talking, we sat together in silence. What could I say? He has to obey his parents? I did not obey my own parents. I ran off, leaving a prosperous home straight into the wilderness. I hacked rocks, suffered from malarial fever, and took my punches. Hadn't I signed up for guard duty, spent whole nights with wounded comrades, and carried a gun myself? Then how could I advise him otherwise? And he, being my son, was as stubborn as I was and would not have obeyed me anyway.

"That evening, before he left, I spoke to him, not like an old Zionist, but as a soft-hearted mother: 'Who will be left to me?' He answered me sternly, 'What kind of way to talk is that?' I'm telling you, he had a head like a wise old man on his shoulders. 'You have Poppa and Zvi, still.' Zvi is my younger, named after my father, Hershl<sup>4</sup>. I said to him, 'You do not need to sacrifice yourself so young:'

"He answered me: 'In fact I am young, and it is not good. But what do you want? For someone else to shed their blood so there can be a motherland for me? Zvi is still here. Maybe he will not have to fight. And don't cry, Momma. It is not going to help. A land always demands blood, sweat and tears.' I'm telling you, he was an old soul. He told me, 'The young gives his blood, the father his sweat, and the mother her tears. But we can do without the tears.' Only later did I get ahold of myself. Woe is me! Both of us spoke as though we were sure he would not come back. Later I beat myself up about it: 'How can a mother talk to her son like that before he goes off to war? I should have spoken to him differently. Differently.' But how could I have spoken to him differently when I knew, and he knew too, that he would fall in battle? How did we know? You can see we knew. But that they would dismember him, that I did not...

p. 204

know. When they would not show me his body, I understood right away. But I did not cry. He had said to me, after all, 'Momma, don't cry. It will not help you. We can do without the tears'.

"But I'm not doing well. I know that the earth demands blood, that's how it has always been. But when the blood that the earth soaks up is the blood of the light of your life, you don't do well. You have a son, so you know. But not crying. 'It can be done without tears,' he said. And he was right. Tears do not help, because we have come to possess a land as our inheritance. And until the earth soaks up your blood, it is not yours!"

In the evening I sat and spoke with my brother.

"If she had cried and become hysterical," I said, "it would have been a lot easier for me to sit with her and to hear her pour out her words. But her dry eyes and quiet talk, her calm shocked me. Why didn't she cry?"

“The Yishuv does not cry,” my brother replied. “The burden is born in silence. We have taken it on ourselves voluntarily. Our sons have not fallen on the battlefield because the goyim were fighting one another, but because we wanted to take a land as our inheritance. Earth demands blood. We know it and we do not cry. This is how it had to be. The misfortune is great in many houses, but it is still nothing compared to what happened to our brothers under Hitler. We have received payment for our spilled blood. A country of our own. This is a comfort.”

The dry eyes of the mothers who sang the Hatikvah, the not-completely-coherent speech of that unfortunate mother, and my brother’s words now came together for me to create a picture of a unique Jewish patriotism.

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1. See in the translator's comments, "On Pair of Hebrew Words in Yiddish"
2. Yortsayts. The anniversary of their deaths.
3. To be a free people in our land / The land of Zion and Jerusalem.
4. The name Hershl comes from 'hirsh', Yiddish for deer. 'Zvi' is Hebrew for deer.

## Chapter 20: Yiddish in the State of Israel

Yiddish is spoken in the State of Israel. It was my impression that Yiddish is spoken as much as Hebrew is spoken, and possibly more. You certainly hear more Yiddish on the bus from Tel-Aviv to Ra'Anana, then you would on the trolley cars or buses in Jewish neighborhoods such as Brownsville and East Flatbush.

Giving a talk in Yiddish bothers no one. I gave lectures in Yiddish in kibbutz Ein Harod and in Moshav Givat Hen. After the talk, a lot of audience members asked questions in Yiddish, while others asked in Hebrew.

Still, the prognosis for Yiddish in the State of Israel is not good. I did not meet a single person there who believes that Yiddish should be taught in the schools, even in the upper levels of the high schools. I did not find a single Jew (and I looked) who wasn't proud of the fact that the younger generation, the Sabras, do not know any Yiddish; even though, by the way, this is not completely true. Obviously, the few professional Yiddishists are an exception.

To what can the fate of Yiddish in the State of Israel be compared? To the fate of a sick, old provincial mother, who is being supported by her rich, educated, and aristocratic children. Of course, you cannot put her out into the street nor even, heaven forbid, shame her. But she may not impose herself on the running of the household. One sees to it that she does not...

p. 206

show herself when important guests are in the house. The children absolutely do not lose any sleep over providing her with a future. An old, sick mother is going to die eventually. But one does not ask for her death to come.

As in the days of Isaac Meyer Dik, people want to improve the old mother's manners. In government offices, in shops and in general whenever someone might speak to an 'educated' person, he would speak to you half 'Datsh' with paseks<sup>1</sup>. Surely German immigration played a role here and, to a certain degree, the pasek-laden Hebrew, but Jews from Kovno and Vilna would speak to me in 'Datsh' until I called their attention to their strange language, or until the conversation became heated. Then they began speaking a rich, luscious Yiddish.

Daily newspapers are published in many languages in Israel. I saw and touched daily newspapers in Polish, German, Hungarian, Rumanian, and English. No Yiddish language daily paper is published.

I heard in America that the government of the Israel has not given permission for there to be a Yiddish newspaper. I do not believe it. Anyone who has been in the State of Israel for even a short time knows that the government would not dare do such a thing. Someone who applied for a permit and did not get it could easily raise a racket and a commotion, and the government would have to give in merely out of embarrassment.

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that there is no Yiddish enthusiast in the present-day State of Israel with the necessary stubbornness, who has a couple of thousand pounds and wants to invest it in a publishing a Yiddish daily paper. The atmosphere here is such that no one champions 'Zhargon'<sup>2</sup>, and no one is interested in distributing a Yiddish paper or any other kind of Yiddish publication. The publisher would have to go against public opinion, and against the leadership of the kibbutzim and the workers collectives who distribute the newspapers. Only a principled and die-hard Yiddishist could initiate such a battle. Such a well-off Yiddishist has not been found in today's Israel. So, a political party ought to publish such a newspaper. But no party in Israel would dare put out a Yiddish daily paper.

p. 207

Because Hebrew is accepted as the national language, the greater part of the middle-aged generation in the State of Israel is effectively mute, and a significant portion of that generation is ignorant. The generation of the first Aliyah, let's say up until "Grabski's Aliyah"<sup>3</sup> admittedly knew Hebrew, though it was an acquired language. The speech of the middle-aged generation lacks naturalness. It speaks Hebrew exactly the way our immigrant generation [in America] speaks English. When someone starts to get angry, he starts speaking in Yiddish. When they want to express love or rage, they use Yiddish. Calculations are done in Yiddish. It's more than a little funny to see them counting. You go onto a bus. Of course, the driver speaks Hebrew, unless you address him in Yiddish. But if you give him paper money and he has to give you change, he counts it into your hand in Yiddish.

The extent to which this current generation is muted can be seen in the humorlessness of the Jews of the State of Israel. The youth is full of humor, but the middle-aged do not joke. Heated debates are conducted on the bus and on the street, but they are never spiced up with a joke or a saying. If a joke is told, it is usually in Yiddish.

I walked on the streets of Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Ra'Anana, and listened to the people's speech. When it came to something weighty, they switched to Yiddish. The same is true in the kibbutzim.

I remember one early morning in Tel-Aviv. I heard a furniture truck arrive outside my window. The driver and his two helpers came down from the cab and began figuring out how they were going to carry a heavy sofa up to the third floor. After a brief conference I heard noise. I stuck my head out and saw that they had secured a dolly and had begun pulling up the sofa. One worker pulled the rope, the second one steered, and the third made sure everything was going correctly. Suddenly I heard the worker who was making sure everything went right began to yell in a rich Besarabian accent with 'kometes'<sup>4</sup>.

"A flaming brand in your guts, Motele Gonif. What, do you want to leave your pretty one a young widow? Give yourself a shake. Be careful with the bend.

p. 208

“Lat, lat (slowly, slowly)! Look at what clumsy paws he has, like they were kneaded out of clay!”

The workers did not just take it in silence, but answered with words too colorful to be put down on paper. But it is interesting that as soon as the danger was past, they switched back into Hebrew: “Yemine! Shmoal! Lat! Lat! Kol bseder! (Right, left, slowly, Good!).

But if [the immigrants in] that crowd, let’s say up to the late 20s of this century, were self-consciously Zionists and Hebraists, those who came later were simply Jews, who could not speak any Hebrew. This element has remained fairly ignorant. They have learned to speak Hebrew, I would say a "basic" Hebrew. But they cannot read a book or a newspaper. In my opinion, people in general read the news very shallowly. I rarely heard regular Israelis discussing an article or a poem. And absolutely not a book.

My words might ring strange. Someone might ask: “How can that be? Ten newspapers circulate in Israel (until recently, eleven Hebrew papers. One afternoon paper closed two months ago), and magazines flood the market! And books!”

It should be remembered, though, that only two of the morning newspapers pay for themselves, and only one of them is published in part by a private individual. Of the three afternoon papers, two are merely collections of well-edited political proclamations, or typical tabloid newspapers. The third afternoon paper is put out by Mapai.

All ten newspapers have a circulation of 150 thousand. The seven morning papers, eighty thousand, and the three afternoon papers, around sixty or seventy thousand. It would be interesting to see how many papers would be published independently. It’s no great achievement to use party funds, collected worldwide, and publish newspapers.

With magazines, it is worse still. All of them without exception are published by parties. The way it was told to me, only the...

p. 209

illustrated weekly pays for itself. Others deny even that. Books, with a few exceptions, are published by the parties. It would be important to know how many books and magazines the Yishuv could publish itself, without the help of party money.

The flavor of the Yishuv is given by our East-European, Yiddish-speaking Jews. The leadership is also in their hands. Until recently, the Oriental Jews were a very small minority. It would have been a lot easier to teach this minority Yiddish than to teach everyone Hebrew. It’s also not true that the Yemini Jews know Hebrew. They speak an Arabic dialect and very few of them know Hebrew when they arrive in the country. A man I discussed this with gave me the real key to why Hebrew was adopted. He said:

“It’s true what you are saying, but what Jew who does not already know Zhargon would want to take the trouble to learn Zhargon?”



This contempt towards Yiddish comes from the fact that those who built this country hated the exile and ran away from it. They did not want to maintain the language that developed in exile. They wanted a total break with the exile, a return to long ago. They were ready to make all kinds of sacrifices and in fact made those sacrifices. They took a partial muting and 'languagelessness' upon themselves. Their children will be more able, in fact already are able. One of the first Zionists tells it:

"We were young and wanted to express ourselves, but our Hebrew was foreign, stammering, and incapable of expressing things precisely. And the children were babies, crawling in sand. We squirmed and struggled and finally decided "k'tshorto", the devil with it! When they grow up, they will arrange it they way they want to arrange it. For them it will be a living language for real. And our...

p. 210

salvation will rely on that which is in our heart and in our mouth.<sup>5</sup>"

We ought to understand that courage is required not only to drain swamps, to plant in the wilderness and to be ready to die from malaria, but there's also courage and superhuman determination in reviving a language. To revive a language, and to take on a new pronunciation while doing so, is no trivial thing. The Irish have been struggling to revive the Irish language for as long as the Jews in the State of Israel have been wrestling with Hebrew, and have not succeeded in revitalizing their Irish tongue. It should have been easier for them, because they do have a portion of their people who never gave up the language. Still people speak English in Ireland almost exclusively. They were lacking in Jewish stubbornness. The Welsh succeeded even less than the Irish. It's understandable that those who proved to have the kind of stubbornness needed to renew a language had to develop a certain enmity and contempt for their mother tongue, Yiddish. We cannot reproach them for it. As a teacher in Israel said to me:

"You Yiddishists are reproaching us? You ought to bury your faces in mud out of shame and humiliation (in Hebrew, flowery language seems to flow even in everyday speech). We exhausted ourselves and revived a dead language. We installed an artificial tongue in our mouths, and you tore out a living tongue from yours. It was easier for you to speak Yiddish to your children than it was for us to speak Hebrew to ours. But you busted your tongues to speak, of all things, English. We prevailed out of stubbornness. So, now you want us to cry over your failure? No, we will not wail over your misfortune. Moreover, Yiddish is still not dead, and we should keep it. Once, we broke the windows of print shops for printing a Yiddish journal. Now we do not do that, because we are sure of ourselves. Let a couple of journals be published, for appearances sake. But we are supposed to put out a daily newspaper and teach Yiddish in our schools? Absolutely no way. When Yiddish is completely dead as a spoken language, say, like Aramaic, we will teach and study it in our universities. And even in high school."

p. 211

And therefore, even though a lot of Yiddish is spoken here, almost no books are published in Yiddish in Israel. I was told that a year ago no more than two or three books of Yiddish poetry came out in Israel.

Yes there is even a Yiddish radio program. A quarter past ten in the evening the day's news is broadcast in Yiddish. Before the news is read, the announcer says, "This is a program for the diaspora."

Yiddish folk songs are sung in Hebrew. In the three months that I was in Israel, I heard a Yiddish song only once: Cantor Goldstone was visiting the country, and he sang a Yiddish song.

People speak Yiddish, but they do not want to read Yiddish. Several libraries have holdings of old Yiddish books, but no one borrows them. Certainly, few books are bought. Here's one example:

A shopkeeper lives near my brother's house. He is not a poor man, and he loves to read Yiddish. His friends from Argentina and from America send him Yiddish books. He said to me:

"Perhaps you brought Yefroykin's *Khesbm Hanefesh* with you?<sup>6</sup> I have heard it's a very good book, and I would like to read it."

"You can get that book," I answered him, "for a pound (three dollars). I know that you can afford the luxury."

The man answered me. "For a pound I can buy a fine book in Hebrew."

That is the old zealots' relationship to Yiddish. They are principled Hebraists. The crowd that is arriving now is not concerned about the fate of Yiddish. This is an element that is not overly interested in cultural values in general. The tragedy is that of the older generation that came to Israel. I will never forget the old-timer in kibbutz R-H:

The chronicler, the kibbutz shoemaker/writer, told me that his father is here on the kibbutz. He has been in Israel for not more than...

p.212

two years. He, the son, brought him over from Germany. The old man is a remarkable person. In his old age, he has begun shaping figures out of clay. But he is very lonely here. He would be happy to meet a Yiddish writer, and to get to hear a word or two in Yiddish.

I went to see the man. Truly an exceptional character. I am no expert on sculpture, but the figures that he sculpted seemed very artfully made.

He lived in a passable room, in a good building. On the table were several editions of the three-day-a-week Yiddish newspaper, a four-page pamphlet published by the Left-Zionists, a volume of Sholem Aleichem, a prayer book, a volume of Peretz, and Mendelev's *Kliatshe*. A strange sadness lay upon the man's face. I asked him:

"So, you ought to be in seventh heaven now. After all your troubles, you are here in the State of Israel with your son. What is it you are missing?"

He sighed heavily. "Absolutely, yes. But it is hard for me to live here, very hard. Often a horrible thought occurs to me: *Was it worth saving myself?*

"What is it? You don't have what you need here?"

"Heaven forbid. They support me and treat me with respect. And I am still able to earn my daily bread. I am a tailor. Can still work a few hours a day. But in my old age, foolish thoughts crawl into my head. I really shouldn't talk this way. I have it good, but if only I could be among our Jews..."

I could not get more out of him. I only grasped the real meaning of what he was saying in another kibbutz, in the Jordan Valley, when I spoke to another of our Jews.

That man was a Brooklynite. He had come to the kibbutz to be with his son. He was a member of the Yidish Natsionaler Arbeter Farband<sup>7</sup>. He is a passionate Zionist. He sat with me and described the wonder of the kibbutz, the miracles of the recent war, and the beauty of living in the State of Israel. When he was done, a deep sigh escaped from him.

"For one of our Jews it is hard to live here. If I did not receive the *Yidishe Kemfer* every week, I would not be able to stand it."

I looked at him with astonishment. He saw my surprise and explained to me:

p. 213

"A Jew like me is used to having a Yiddish newspaper and a Yiddish journal. Here I can just barely get through the headlines with great effort. Between you and me, it's the same with a lot of people younger than I am. At home, I went to meetings, got excited, and had a say. Here, I am silenced. Of course, I am permitted to speak Yiddish during gatherings. But, first of all, it is not pleasant to speak Yiddish when everyone else is speaking Hebrew. And second, I don't always understand what they are saying, especially when Sabras are talking. When they speak Hebrew, it does not even sound like a Jewish language. God spare me for saying so, but their Hebrew sounds more like Italian. For a Jew like me, it would have been better to live out my life in Brooklyn among my friends from the Farband. But my children are here. What wouldn't a father do to be near his children?"

Yiddish is alive in the State of Israel, but it's a life tolerated under duress. No one wants the language or worries about it. The parties employ it when it is necessary, for example at election

time. The state used it during the war, when they had to put out reading material for the army. The state uses it now, too, when they have to talk to the public. But there is no longer fear of Yiddish. Hebrew is secure, deeply rooted in the country. In all of Israel, I never heard anyone agitate for Hebrew. Only in the 'Yiddishist' Safed, I saw a sign at the bus station, "Speak Hebrew". But even there, when I spoke to them in Yiddish, they answered me in Yiddish.

Can you reproach someone? There is no one. Those who originally came to build the country oriented themselves to Hebrew. What complaint could be made against them now? But I want it to be clear that all the rumors going around, about how there is a better relationship to Yiddish now, are false.

The Yishuv knows practically nothing, I repeat, practically nothing of American Yiddish literature, nor of the literature that bloomed in Poland and in the remnants of Soviet Russia. Our greatest giants could come to the State of Israel and travel the length and breadth of the community under their own names, and almost...

p. 214

no one would know who they are. Naturally, it sometimes happens that a new arrival will recognize their name, or someone will remember them from long ago, but you can take it as a general rule that the longer someone has lived in the State of Israel, the longer it has been since he has read any Yiddish book or newspaper. And this is not true only of the masses. I have been told that Hebrew writers have not opened any Yiddish books for years. Just as with us in America, Hebrew literature stopped with Judah Leib Gordon for the old maskilim<sup>8</sup>, so for everyone in the State of Israel, Yiddish literature stopped on the day that he arrived in the land.

That is the situation. We cannot complain to them as long as the status of Yiddish is not raised among us in America. It's foolish to expect them to revive Yiddish in the mouths of their children as long as the language is dead in the mouths of our own youth. If Yiddish became a greater cultural factor in Jewish America, then maybe (and I mean, maybe) Yiddish would be more respected there. We can influence them with deeds, but not with complaints.

That is the true situation. And let us not fool ourselves. To say that there is a better relationship to Yiddish now is not true. Yiddish is a poor cousin in the State of Israel. This may be because its status is no better among us or among our children.

*A note afterward:* Recently, claims have been made that the Government will not issue a permit for any Yiddish daily newspaper. But permission is granted for papers to appear three times a week. So, I repeat: If a die-hard Yiddishist could be found who was willing to contribute ten or twenty thousand pounds, he could put out a paper three days a week in the morning and another three days a week in the afternoon, and there would be a daily paper. Under the same inopportune conditions, Hebraists would figure something out. It's sad that one would have to resort to such tricks to get past officials in a Jewish. But the Jewish government can take this kind of antagonistic stance towards Yiddish, because they know that neither the Jews in the diaspora nor the Jews in the State of Israel will fight for Yiddish when Hebrew occupies its place.

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1. *Isaac Meyer Dik* (1807-1893), a Yiddish writer, who nonetheless considered Yiddish to be inferior to the more "modern", higher status European languages, such as German. "*Datsh*" with *paseks*. 'Daytsh' is the Yiddish word for German. A pasek is a vowel sound approximately as the first vowel in the English 'father'. So, Simon uses "half 'Datsh'" here to mean an affected way of speaking Yiddish, influenced by modern Hebrew .
  2. 'Zhargon', or 'jargon', is a pejorative name that the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment Jews gave to Yiddish, when they were trying to convince Jews to learn and use the languages of their host nations. The name persisted among those who held Yiddish in low esteem.
  3. Named after Władysław Grabski, Prime Minister of Poland, whose taxation system, implemented in 1924, imposed a severe burden on Jewish merchants and shopkeepers and was the impetus for a significant increase in emigration to Israel.
  4. 'Kometses'. Modern Hebrew pronounces the two vowels komets-alef and pasek-alef equivalently, while they differ in Yiddish (roughly 'aw' and 'ah', respectively). In Southeastern Yiddish, a dialect group that includes Besarabian Yiddish, kometses are shifted still farther from the pasek-alef, to 'oo'.
  5. Simon first quotes this account in Hebrew, then translates it. The English here is translated from the Yiddish translation. *In our heart and in our mouth*, is from Deuteronomy 30:11, and represents an assurance that God's commandments are not impossible to carry out.
  6. *A kheshbm hanefesh*, (An Accounting of the Soul), by Israel Yefroykin, was published in Paris in 1948.
  7. Jewish National Workers Alliance. A leftist Zionist, Yiddish organization, affiliated with the Poale Zion political party. In the US, its activities included a mutual aid society, a school system, a summer camp, and publishing (including the weekly journal *Yidishe Kemfer*).
  8. *The old maskilim*. Proponents of the Haskala, the Jewish enlightenment. For those who came of age at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Eastern Europe (where the enlightenment arrived later than in Western Europe), Modern Hebrew literature and Yiddish literature were equally new, and young intellectuals often read both avidly. Gordon (a Hebrew poet) died in 1892.

## Chapter 21: Responsa

There is a special neighborhood in Tel-Aviv, where party functionaries and government officials live. There are several houses there where journalists, teachers and writers live next to one another. Rent is inexpensive there. The houses were built recently, and have all the modern comforts.

In the Tel-Aviv café where I ate, I often used to meet an editor of a Yiddish magazine. He invited me to visit him several times. Finally, I could not refuse him, and I went to see him one afternoon.

He lived in three fine rooms, with a large veranda on the courtyard. The rooms were small, by our standards, and very modestly furnished. But it was a comfortable apartment, decorated in excellent taste.

I met two more journalists there, invited for lunch. Right after lunch, five more writers came: The first was a world-known American Yiddish writer, knowledgeable in Hebrew, a scholar, a Talmudic authority and an encyclopedist; the second was a professor of history at Hebrew University; the third, a famous bible researcher; and finally, there were two well-known storytellers.

A passionate discussion developed, about the State of Israel, the diaspora, Hebrew, Yiddish, Arab questions, Messianism and all the burning Jewish questions. Almost all of

p. 216

them had read the book *Jews Among the Nations*,<sup>1</sup> and my little tract was the reason and the stimulus for the discussion. Later it went beyond the bounds of the book. I believe that the core of that discussion best expresses the arguments of the State of Israel's opponents and of the honest responses of the State of Israel's proponents.

I intentionally do not mention names because, first, it was a private discussion and I do not have the right to speak for them. If they want to express themselves publicly, each of them has an available journal where he can write what he wants. Second, I cannot guarantee other people's exact words. I am transmitting the discussion as I received it, and as it affected me. It can easily be that I am interpolating my own thoughts into their speech. What is certain is that this pointed conversation is a part of my impressions of the State of Israel, and gives a summary of my moods and conclusions.

The American Yiddish Writer began and two of the others then helped him out.

"I have read *Yidn Tsvishn Felker*. I do not agree with your conclusion. You write, "A Jewish State in Israel is no more than the liberation of a small portion of Jewry from foreign captivity. This is a small salvation<sup>2</sup> and a great comfort for the Jewish people at this time." No, you are incorrect. The State of Israel is no small salvation and no comfort. It is a risky venture that can

lead to the greatest catastrophe. Let us take the problems of the present State of Israel one at a time.

“The Arab question. Everyone thinks that the question of the Arabs has been solved. No more Arabs, and it’s done. They ran away or were driven out, and the State of Israel is ‘Arab-free’<sup>3</sup>. All done with the Arab question. I’m telling you that the Arab question has only become more acute. Hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees remain at our borders. In any Jewish community you come to, you can climb up the water tower and see Arab villages. The enemy is in arm’s reach. Do you expect that those Arabs who ran away will forget their homeland?

“People cry that the Arabs ran away. One does not just...

p. 217

run away from one’s own home. Maybe “*ki nafal pakhad hayehudim aleyhem*” played a large part here?<sup>4</sup> Deir Yasin was no isolated case. Second, if they did run away, does that justify the fine things we have done to their property? All of you who were here know how the Jews conducted themselves. Here, in plain black and white, is a witness. Moshe Smiliansky writes in Ha’Aretz of the 5<sup>th</sup> of Elul, 5709 [Aug 30, 1949]:

*“An epidemic of ‘grabbing’ has taken hold of all the citizens. Individuals, kibbutzim, men, women and children – all of them have gone off looting. Doors, windows, doorposts, bricks, shingles, floorboards, and parts of cars... Ruined houses, wrecked cars, so say those who were responsible for watching over the abandoned property. Others say that the guardians’ hands were not clean either.*

“From a national point of view, it is foolish and we are playing with fire. The Arabs can afford to lose not just one war, but several. They have somewhere to run to. We cannot afford to lose even one battle. Where will we run?

“And the Arabs do not forget! They will not even sit with us at the same table. There was rejoicing in the newspapers: Egypt has invited the Jews to the international conference on health, which will take place in Alexandria. By the next day, the foreign minister denied it. The statement casts a shadow over all our military victories. We cannot live in perpetual enmity among enemies who are forty times our number.

“Danger number two: The Jews’ underestimation of the Arabs. You hear how the victor talks about the vanquished: They are barbarians, physically weak, militarily inept, under the yoke of feudal lords, economically backward, culturally in the sixteenth century, and who knows what else. Suppose it is true today (which in fact it is not at all true); what can happen twenty or thirty years from now? Japan beat Russia forty years ago. But Russia has three times as large a population, and that was the decisive factor [in WWII]. Twenty years from now, that could happen here with the Arabs, too.

“And now about spiritual matters. The matter of Yiddish. I am not a Yiddishist. But can we afford to knowingly give up such a...

national cultural possession? Do people think a language can be created overnight? It will take hundreds of years before Hebrew will have the flexibility, tenderness, richness and spoken eloquence of Yiddish. As of now, Hebrew is a synthetic, rationally-built language. The national loss from giving up an eloquent language cannot yet be appraised. Only many generations from now will the greatness of the loss be acknowledged.

“And taking on the Sephardic pronunciation? Jews have prayed, studied, said blessings, and sang songs with the Ashkenazy pronunciation for thousands of years. Every word has its intonation and expressiveness. How much grief and loneliness lie in the word *yosem*<sup>5</sup>. Suddenly, we have made a new word *yatom* – a hollowed-out word. And the names! *Avrom* is a Jewish name, after Avrom Avinu (Father Abraham); *Sore*, a name after Muter Sore (Mother Sarah). But *Avram* and *Sara* are two non-Jewish names. Only those who wanted to shake off and tear themselves away from the entire Jewish past could accept the Oriental pronunciation.

“The State of Israel is still small, whether in quality or in quantity. It has few people in comparison to the diaspora, and is spiritually poor. Nevertheless the State of Israel aims to achieve hegemony over Jewish life. It looks with contempt on all the communities of the People of Israel in the diaspora. Not only is the spiritual life of the great Jewish community in America denied, but they are continually threatened with their downfall. Every step of the way, you have heard: *A Hitler will come to you in America, too. Escape. Don't bother establishing any institutions, don't be fools busying yourselves with children's education, because your lives are not secure. Any day now a new Hitler will emerge and kill you off.*

“What kind of schadenfreude does this give you? How are you so sure that if another Hitler comes and the Jews of America are exterminated, that the Jewish community in the State of Israel will be spared? After all, it is only a coincidence that in the current catastrophe the Russians did not stop Hitler in Bialystok and the English did stop the Germans in El Alamein. The Jewish community in Israel did not save itself through its own strength.

“And this threatening American Jews with another Hitler is directly connected to the immigration question. Go to the immigrant camps and to the villages, where the immigrants have settled and talk to them. You will hear...

that they were promised gold mountains. A large portion, possibly the majority, were simply hoodwinked with promises. Nor were they picky about who was taken from other countries, with the exception of Germany, in order to create political pressure. Parents were taken from Romania, leaving children behind, and a lot of children were taken, leaving parents behind.

“The moral and economic pressure to bring out the Jews from the German [DP] camps, can be justified to a certain extent. That can't be helped. But Jews were just taken out of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Jews had not suffered from anti-Semitism. People came and terrified them about the coming economic changes. So, they ran away, because they thought a better country was waiting



for them. Fundamentally, this is a terrible precedent. It means that Jews are not rooted where they are. A homeland is waiting for them somewhere. They can escape at the first difficulty. How can you build lasting institutions with such a feeling? How can someone with such a sense of temporary belonging root themselves in a country? In the first exile, the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah [29:5] told the exiles:

*Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and have sons and daughters with them. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, and let them have sons and daughters, and multiply and do not become fewer.*

“But what do you do? You cry: *A Hitler will come upon you! Do not build houses, because they will be taken from you! May your children not marry there, and may they have no children, because they, too, will be killed in the end! Save yourselves while there is still time! Come here to us in time, while you still have your possessions, and they will let you out, so that you will not come to us when we will have to build refugee camps.* Can a people thrive among the nations with such a sense of immanent catastrophe? Let us not, heaven forbid, infect the whole world with this malice. It would convince even the best among the gentiles that the anti-Semites are right: We are strangers everywhere.

“Now, the question of immigration. As long as there was a little immigration to Israel and the motive for it was idealistic,...

p. 220

the difficulties of adjusting to the country did not play a role. Now when there has been mass immigration, and no longer of idealistic human material, the real problems of adaptation will soon begin. No nation has succeeded in settling such a large number of people in their country. No nation has been able to awaken a pioneering spirit among such a great number of people. And here there is a need to settle the Negev and other barren places. There is no industry in the country, and there is not enough raw material to develop any kind of great industry. The markets of the neighboring countries have been closed off. What will be done with the immigrants after the dust has settled? A nation cannot live off charity forever.

“For the diaspora there is also a great danger in the current conception of Israel, that Jewish people must be unitary, from the same mold, like all other peoples who occupy their land, a people of the state<sup>6</sup>. For a span of two thousand years or more, we have not been a nation in the accepted sense of the word. We have been connected to an abstraction, not to earth. The commonality between different parts of the people has often been minimal. The communal link between individuals has often been barely perceptible. What kind of spiritual commonality is there between the French Jewish philosopher [Henri] Bergson and the old Lubavitcher Rebbe? What sort of communal ties are there between, for example, a Yemini “sage” and a secular Jewish union activist in New York? Nevertheless, the world considered them to be Jews and they also considered themselves Jews. A kind of thin spiritual thread kept them all connected. In hindsight, it was very difficult for Jews to stop being Jews. Often someone remained a Jew due to a negative, because he never officially declared himself not to be a Jew.

“But this thin spiritual thread is not strong enough to hold the Jews together now, if we become a people of the state. Within the country itself there is no dissolving the conglomeration of tribes: Yemini and Moroccan, who speak Arabic; Bulgarian Jews who speak Ladino; Eastern European Jews, who speak Yiddish; and Kurdistan Jews, who speak a Caucasian dialect— separate tribes with their customs and concepts and distinct languages. One must meld together all these disparate Jews into one...

p. 221

unified mass, that will have more or less one face, a people like all other peoples, with its own language and unified customs, connected to the one national flag and language. As long as this conception of unity is naturalized here, the diaspora Jews will automatically not be Jews. The basis of membership in the Jewish people has been the feeling that some abstraction binds every individual one of us to the Community of Israel. If this feeling dies out, then the Jewish people will be diminished and wither almost automatically.

“Kibbutzim are the backbone of the Yishuv. These democratic cooperatives, with their system of true political, economic, and social equality have the capacity to influence the world. But the chief flaw of the kibbutzim is that they are based on asceticism and on a general denial of individualistic life. Asceticism and denial of individualism was very well suited to the idealists who came here to build a country and to redeem the Jewish people from exile. But they are not well suited to the new immigrants, who are seeking happiness and fulfilling personal lives after years of forced collectivism. Would you say that they must become kibbutzniks, whether they want to or not? No. You can build a kibbutz with ninety percent idealists and ten percent who have no other choice; but not with ninety percent who have no other choice and ten percent idealists. A quarter of a million Jews were brought here without calculation, without a prior plan for how to get them settled in, and without considering the fact that they are unsuited for pioneer agricultural work. Rather, you depend on God’s mercy and the support of American Jews. *Yihye b’seder* – it will work out – is your favorite saying. No it will not be b’seder. The honeymoon will end, time will be up, and the bill will have to be paid.

“And one more basic issue. The state must be secular. No state can conduct itself too fairly. There must be a certain degree of evil towards one’s neighbors. The most basic rules of fairness, righteousness, and justice must often be disregarded, when they go against the interests of the state, whether or not they turn out to be true interests. Holiness, and the justness of daily life will have to become a private matter in the State of Israel, as everywhere else in the world. It seems probable that among the Jews as elsewhere in the world, that when a soldier comes into a synagogue,..

p. 222

he’ll leave his rifle at the door and go in to pray. Rabbis will talk about God’s righteousness on the battlefield. Like with the goyim, certain hours will be set aside for holiness and God’s justice, but daily life will go on with its evil. Shabbes and holidays will be secularized. After praying, it will be psychologically possible to go hunting. The greatness of Judaism has been that it has always been opposed to compromise. Can you imagine Rabbi Israel Salanter or the Khofets

Khayim in the role of a government minister? Now in a nation-state, all the holiness of Jewish life will become secondary to secular life. We will become like all other small nations in the Middle East, or in the Balkans. Is the redemption we have waited for over thousands of years? Is it worth it? *Lo mini velo miktsesa.*<sup>7</sup>”

I will not translate the last four words, because in Yiddish they ring very harshly. But still harsher words than what I have given here were spoken. I want it to be clear that they were not spoken in the order that I presented them, nor were they spoken by a single person, without a pause. I have set them out this way only in order that the opposing points of view should come across clearly. The answers to these tough questions will also come across more clearly if they are set out in order and without interruption.

The professor of history spoke first and then the others helped him out.

“With all your complaints here you are making one fundamental error. By what you are saying it would appear that Jewish life has not changed in the last hundred years, and you are ignoring the catastrophe that just happened. Your words make it seem as though Jews have lived quietly and in peace among the gentiles, and that some crazy Zionists came along and decided on their own to go and conquer a country. That is not how it was. The current complete rupture in Jewish history came about because of the rupture in Jewish spiritual life and because of the Goyim’s persecution.

“Let us take the Arab question first of all. You talk just as though you have only just discovered that the Jews have come to the Land of Israel to occupy the land and become the majority. We never denied it. This was the program of the bilutsim, of the settlers of the first wave of Jewish...

p. 223

immigration, and of Ahad Ha’Am as well. But we never expected that it would be resolved the way it has happened now.

“The first pioneers in the country knew what they wanted. They wanted to take the land through colonization. Sh. Ben-Zion, when he depicted the first vanguard, told how they worked like dogs and went hungry yet kept their distant goal in mind. Ragged, tattered, half-starving Jews sang in the evenings. What did they sing? “Al gdot haYarden...”<sup>8</sup>

“Listen closely to the words: *On the banks of the Jordan and in Sharon, there are the Arab companies. This land is going to belong to us, and you will be among the builders.* Do you hear? Even in the song “Idol Worshippers” Tchernichovsky does not say: *And you will be among the conquerors.* No, only among the builders. To take the land through work.

“And the Jews in fact wanted to get along with the Arabs. You would say: *The Arabs did not want their new neighbors, just as Australia does not want new immigrants, like Canada wants their country for themselves?* So, I ask you, are Australia and Canada right to leave millions of acres of land empty, when Europe is suffocating? The unjust behavior of these two countries should not be accepted as the ethical rule.

“Jews bought up empty tracts of land for good money (which no other nation has done), working and building villages and towns on marshland. Right from the beginning, they set up a government *bzeyr anpin* (in miniature) in their settlements. They did not come to live together with their neighbors, but wanted to have a completely Jewish life, and they did. Well, they thought that they could get along with the Arabs. Of course, they had an alternative plan. If not, they had to have youth who would be able to defend themselves. It came to war, and the Arabs ran away. Agreed, that we partly drove them away. Still, you should also add that we wanted to come to an agreement with them the easy way, right up to the last minute. But they are goyim. They knew...

p. 224

what they wanted to do with us when they won. They assumed that we would do the same. They did not believe our assurances and they ran away. After the fact, we were happy. Now we have a country where there is practically no minority question.

“Take the Arabs back? Where will we put them? Maybe you’re going to tell us to send our refugees back where they came from? History often plays little tricks like that and complicates matters so that no one can untangle them. Under the current circumstances, it is just to settle the Arab refugees in the Arab countries, and not in the State of Israel.

“Your argument that it is dangerous. That our actions set a precedent for the future. So, no one can predict what will happen in a generation or two. And anyway, I ask you, do the goyim need a precedent to attack Jews?

“Now, the question of Yiddish. It is true that our renunciation of Yiddish is a national loss. Adopting the Sephardic dialect is a caprice. But this was not a conspiracy of a few individuals. Jews do not have any respect for Yiddish. It’s a shame, but nevertheless that’s the way it is. The part of the Jewish people that came here have connected the Jewish renaissance, long may it live, with Hebrew. The people apparently agreed with us. You can see that Jews all over the great diaspora have failed to demonstrate the same determination to maintain Yiddish as we have shown here in reviving Hebrew, which is a much more difficult matter. It is also a fact that Hebrew is a greater unifying factor among all the various Jewish “tribes” in the world.

“In general, why do you come complaining to us? Keep Yiddish alive in your own children’s mouths. If the whole American Jewish community spoke Yiddish, we would be forced to reckon with you. But your children speak English. It doesn’t matter whether our children speak Hebrew or Yiddish. Either way, they will still not be able to talk to your alienated younger generation.

“You cry that we are threatening you with a Hitler. You ask: *What kind of schadenfreude does this give you? How are you so sure that if another Hitler comes...*

p. 225

*and the Jews of America are exterminated, that the Jewish community in the State of Israel will be spared?* You are challenging the central principles of Zionism. Both [Leon] Pinsker and Herzl

came to the idea of Zionism because of antisemitism. The Bilu'im came here because of the pogroms in what was then Russia. Nearly every inhabitant of the State of Israel, with a very small number of exceptions, came here to escape from persecution and violence. You claim that the situation with you in America is different. You have true democracy. We do not believe you. We do not think that the goyim consider you to be true citizens. You are fooling yourselves. It does not matter that you think you have equal status to the goyim there. We believe with perfect faith, that your fate will be the same as the fate of all the Jewish communities of the world – downfall. The very fact that you are a significant minority will strengthen hostility to you. And supposing we are wrong and you are right? Of course that's good. But we are afraid. We are allowed to be.

“In general, we would like you to understand that the State of Israel is in fact redemption, but a redemption brought by secularists. It's a revolution in Jewish history – the emergence of a whole new Judaism and a new Jewish people. Why are you yelling like that? First, you are secularists yourselves, and second, why should Judaism remain static? The world is different than it was before. Jews are different than before, and the redemption is also different.

“Yes, we want to limit ourselves now, we want to shrink the community of Israel and connect it to a piece of ground. This is a time when we cannot remain a people if we are scattered all over the world. Just as Jews once sensed that land was unnecessary for the people to preserve its spiritual character, we now believe that the people senses that it must have a land again in order to survive.

“Let's say it is a decline. A spiritual decline. But sometimes one has to sin a little in order to stay alive, so that later he can climb higher. But the fundamental principle of all is, do not expect us to maintain your form of Jewishness. If you want to challenge us, challenge us with deeds. Your philosophizing will have very little effect on us. We are too busy with day-to-day concerns to philosophize now.”

p. 226

I repeat that all these criticisms and responses I've recounted were not said in such a systematic manner. These thoughts were also expressed with a lot more sagacity and scholarship than I have rendered. The main thing that struck me was the earnestness, open-heartedness and honesty of both sides. No one called anyone else an assimilationist. No one, heaven forbid, accused anyone else of insincerity. Jews sat and discussed matters of the utmost import, and every heart was filled with love of the People of Israel, with doubts and with faith. I wrote down the discussion right after that evening. I believe that a lot of what was spoken then reflected the true direction of the thinking of the Jewish community in the State of Israel, and the mood of a great many in the diaspora.

2. In the conclusion to “Jews Among the Nations,” Simon used the Aramaic phrase הצלה פורתא “Small salvation.” Earlier in that book he had discussed Rashi’s commentary on Tractate Gittin 56b:6. There, the sacrifice of the nation state was described as necessary to ensure the survival of a small remnant of scholars. In his conclusion, Simon turns this backwards, saying that the re-establishment of the state has served to ensure the survival of a few.
3. The speaker uses the phrase ‘Arab-rein’, in an accusatory echo of Hitler’s final solution.
4. *Ki nafal*... “And the fear of the Jews fell upon them.” From the Book of Esther.
5. *Yosem* (accent on the first syllable) and *Yatom* (accent on the second syllable) = ‘orphan’.
6. There is no obvious English equivalent for Simon’s use here of *melukhe-folk*. *Melukhe* in hyphenated compounds usually means ‘state’ (*melukhe-kase* = state treasury, *melukhe rosh* = head of state), or else, whether literally or indirectly, ‘government’ (*melukhe-shul* is public school, *melukhe-dinst* is civil service). The word ‘folk’ shares features of a ‘people’ and a ‘nation’ in the sense of national identity. He is contrasting the traditional identity of Jews as a diverse and international people bound by religion, history, and culture, with a people that has a current state nationality in common as the core of their identity.
7. Translator's note: I am unsure how best to transliterate this. It means, roughly, "In no way and not to the slightest degree."
8. The original gives the four lines first in Hebrew, followed by the Yiddish.

## Chapter 22: Back Home

I went into the post office to send a telegram, saying that I am coming home. The employee read the short text and wrinkled his face:

“For shame. A Jew should not send a telegraph to his children from Israel saying, *I’m coming home*. You are merely returning to your temporary residence. Every Jew’s home is here.”

I did not answer. I did not want to fight with anyone on my last day in the State of Israel.

We spent long weeks in Israel, as we had planned to, and I badly wanted to go home. I missed the children and my own four walls. I wanted to sleep in my own bed already. I missed the streets of Brooklyn, and I wanted to have a look at my America. Is it true, what they say here, that my non-Jewish neighbors on my street look at me with concealed hostility? Is it true that Jews do not feel safe on the streets of New York? They had spent so much time here convincing me that it is impossible for Jews to live among gentiles, that soon I would start to believe them. At least they had gotten me good and scared.

We rode to the airport. My brother and sister-in-law sat next to us, pensive and sad. I stole a look at my...

p. 228

brother: A middle-aged man. I tried to compare him to the eight-year-old who I’d left thirty-eight years before in former Russia, and they did not match up. I had been here nearly three months, and it seemed to me that I still had not really talked with him. The eighty-five days had passed like a shadow. Yes, as the Midrash says: “*Like a shadow that flies past... Not like the shadow of a wall, but like the shadow of a bird that flies past.*”<sup>1</sup>

My brother sighed:

“Will we see each other again?”

I did not answer. I just laid my hand on his shoulder. But I was not sad. I was thinking of home now. I wanted to be there. The joy of going home outweighed the sadness of parting with my brother and sister-in-law. The taxi sped across the Plain of Sharon. It was a cloudy day. It started to rain. My brother said:

“I have been in Israel for twenty-eight years, and it has never rained in the month of Elul. But it is raining now, and the fields look wet and sad, as I feel in my heart.”

My daughter, on the other hand, was happy. “Imagine! In just two days we will be in our home. I want to see what our house looks like.”

My brother asked me: “Do you really miss America that much?”

“What do you think?” I answered. “Do you forget thirty-eight years of life in one three-month spell?”

My sister-in-law wiped her eyes. “It would be good if you stayed here, in Yidn-Land.”

I did not answer. We had talked about America and Israel so often and so long. What good would a declaration in our last minutes do?

We had to wait two hours for our airplane to take off. The time crawled like molasses. When the airplane moved, I felt a weight come off me. I made myself...

p. 229

comfortable in my soft chair, leaned my head on the wall, and soon fell fast asleep, as after being deeply shaken.

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A great joy came upon me when we landed in New York, and I saw the dear and happy faces of my children, colleagues, and friends who had come to the airport to welcome us. The Yiddish language sounded strangely sweet in their mouths. The Long Island landscape looked homey and familiar to me.

I lay down in my own bed, listening to the pre-dawn noise. I felt peaceful and secure – I was back home.

I got up early and went into my office. It is not possible to convey the warmth and *doyikayt* [sense of being at home where you are] that I felt when I saw the familiar furniture, my partner and my dental nurse. Everything sang to me, “Home again!”

But gradually, little-by-little, Israel began to hound me. Now it is Sunday morning. I’m sitting on the green bench next to my house. The street is full of children playing ball. None of them comes up to me. When they see me, they greet me: “Hi, you!” and are soon absorbed by their game. Yes, the orphan twins, Al and Richard, who are being raised by my neighbor McGreevey, come to ask for chewing gum. I am expecting them and give each of them a whole pack. Al asks in a child-like way:

“Where were you all summer”

Out of me pops the answer, “In the Land of the Jews.”

I wonder at myself that I did not say “in Palestine,” or “in the State of Israel,” but “in the Land of the Jews”.



Yidn-Land, Yidn-Land. It is different there. Now I am sitting on my brother's veranda on Shabbes. A regiment of children led by a young girl runs by. "Shalom!" they all greet me in unison, and look expectantly at the pile of newspapers and magazines...

p. 230

lying on the table next to me. Later, they will come and rummage through the magazines. For now, there are only two children with me: my brother's girl Aviva and the neighbor's girl Ilona. They have already leafed through all of the "Devar L'yeladim", the "Hamishmor L'yeladim", "Hatsufe L'yeladim" and the other children's magazines. They practice a dance, "Mayim." They sing the song about water and accompany it with a dance. My wife remarks:

"Oh, if only we could bring them to an evening at our Sholem Aleichem Shul! The audience would go crazy."

Soon the children will return from their "action". The leader will come to visit my daughter. They speak very well together. My daughter speaks Yiddish and throws in an English word or two, for which the Sabra will quickly find a Hebrew expression, and the Israeli girl will speak in Hebrew, throwing in a Yiddish word, for which my daughter will find the Hebrew translation. My daughter will talk about the kibbutzim, and the Israeli girl will ask about America. A little later, the rest of the group will come read the newspapers and magazines. It will not take long before they begin to argue. Three or four of them will decide they want the same newspaper at the same time. I will make peace among them.

A ball flies into the window screen of my house with a bang. I wake from my daydream and go off for a walk.

I meet my old neighborhood policeman. He embraces me and begins asking me about the State of Israel. A completely different policeman floats into my mind. It was in Ra'Anana. I was standing in a bookstore. I came to pick up a book that I had ordered. The bookseller made me a little compliment:

"I have only gotten two copies of the *Perush hegryoni le-sefer Iyov* by Aaron [Armand] Kaminka. One for you and one for our Tanakh teacher in the high school. He can't help it. He needs the book because this year he is teaching his students the Book of Job. But you, I guess, are a true lover of Tanakh."

A policeman came into the store, a policeman with a revolver and all the...

p. 231

paraphernalia. He asked the bookseller if he had a volume of Isaiah with the commentary by S. L. Gordon. He'd lost his copy of the book. Now his whole set of the Tanakh is broken up.

The bookseller promised to get it for him. Meanwhile, he should meet a Jew from America, who also loves Tanakh. The policemen spoke Hebrew to me at first, then switched to Yiddish:

“So, you come from the diaspora and are interested in Tanakh, you're probably an expert on “Shvarba.”<sup>2</sup> So, how do you interpret verse thirteen in Isaiah, chapter six? No matter how much I look at the interpretations, the passage is not coherent to me.”

It gets worse and worse. Day in, and day out, the reality of home bangs up against corresponding facts from of the State of Israel.

I go to Brooklyn City Hall, and immediately think of the “Bet Hamoetsot” in Ra’Anana. I went to there to meet with the mayor of the city. He was happy to receive me and spoke a hearty Yiddish. He asked about the teachers in the American Yiddish schools. He'd been here in America decades before. Soon he ordered his secretary to clear his desk and bring tea for his guests. After tea, he showed us how you can see all of Ra’Anana from a third floor window. He told us to look and proudly asked us to look out and behold the large Hannukah Menorah, that stood at the top of the tower of the City Hall. He told me, “On Hannukah, when we light the menorah, it can be seen from twelve kilometers away.”

I am unhappy with the Yiddish schools. I compare these garrets with their cramped little rooms to the school buildings in Ra’Anana, Ein Harod, Givat Hen, and other communities in the State of Israel.

There is no sleeping at night. Dozens of ‘whys’ needle my brain:

“Why were they able to break with their old lives, while we all only wanted to make our lives more comfortable?”

“Why do we strive so hard for our children to become careerists, while they strive for their children to be kibbutzniks...

p.232

or moshavniks? Didn’t we and they all come from the same shtetls, where we looked with contempt at people who thought only about their careers?”

The needling goes on:

“Run away. You can easily get into a kibbutz. You have a trade, are a good dental surgeon and you are still not too old. You would live among Jews. You would start to speak Hebrew. It is, after all, a Jewish language. In six months you would be able to write in Hebrew as well as in Yiddish, and absolutely be able to speak it. You could translate your children’s books into Hebrew yourself. What a dear readership you would have!”

But that would mean running away. Running away from a home again, from a people, running away from difficulties and immigrating again. And even more, I do not want to concede by running away that Jews have no hope for their Yiddishkayt here in America. I am not ready to

give up on a community of five million so easily. Nor can I tear the Yiddish tongue out of my mouth.

But it is clear to me that we cannot go on with our lives the way they are, here in America. We cannot content ourselves with merely a supplemental<sup>3</sup> Judaism. Such a Judaism is an easy Judaism, but very hard to bear. We need to begin to teach ourselves and the public that we must break with our lives, adapt the old Judaism to our understanding and found Jewish shtetls here. So, we have tried and failed. This does not mean that we ought not to try again.

Certainly, it is a lot harder now to begin a break. We are all old people, and the young generation of Jews is not even antagonistic to us. It is foreign. Nevertheless, there is still a large middle-aged generation and a small youth.

One thing ought to be clear: If the diaspora goes on with its lack of creativity, it means a total rupture in Jewish history. A new Jewish people [folk] will now emerge. A people that will have the outer form of Judaism, but essentially will be a people like all other peoples, a small people in the Middle East. Those who satisfy themselves that this is temporary and hope that this is only a passing tempest will have an easy path. But those who do not want the Jewish people to...

p. 233

diminish, to go under everywhere and be left merely in the State of Israel, they must understand that a supplemental Judaism cannot do the job. Either they will break from their present lives and return to building an unique and authentic Judaism in the diaspora or, if not, they will have to agree to concentrate all strength in the building of the State of Israel, even abandoning all local Jewish institutions and Jewish life. They'll have to support only those organizations that believe we are merely fertilizer for the State of Israel. There is no other way out, except to fool themselves and confuse the population with empty words.

These are harsh words. But they have not been expressed with a light heart. This is the truth as I have seen it. A person ought to speak the truth, even when it hurts him and all his near and dear ones.

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1. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 96:2

2. Eshim vearbe. Rashi's commentaries.

3. Simon used this phrase elsewhere in his writings, to describe a daily life that is essentially the same as that of the larger non-Jewish population, with religious observance on Shabbes and the holidays added on.