

NINETY YEARS OF HABONIM-DROR SA: A SHORT HISTORY

By Gideon Shimoni, October 2020

FOUNDATIONS: A JEWISH SCOUT MOVEMENT

The extraordinary significance of Zionism as sentiment, ideology and organization is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of South African Jewry, and youth movements have always been Zionism's beating heart and conscience. Habonim (now Habonim-Dror), founded in early 1931, has been the largest and most influential of these youth movements, at least until the last few decades when the orthodox-religious youth movement, Bnei Akiva, challenged its status. To be sure, flourishing youth societies, engaging youth above 16 years of age, existed before Habonim was founded. Known as Judean Societies, and Young Israel Societies, their activities were coordinated in 1932 through the formation of a Zionist Youth Council affiliated to the Zionist Federation. However, Habonim was the first youth movement that focused upon the adolescent age group (initially 12 to 16 years) and engaged each generation of its own graduates in the *hadracha* (guidance) of the next generation of Jewish youth.

When Norman and Nadia Lourie founded Habonim, it was essentially as a Jewish equivalent of Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts. It was entirely independent and autonomous. Lourie himself had adopted the idea in London where he had joined Wellesley Aron in the founding of Habonim on the same model about a year earlier. Its underlying educational purpose was to foster character development in a healthily fun-filled, Jewishly meaningful and socially caring spirit. However, from the outset, the main emphasis was on identification with the Jewish national renaissance epitomized by Zionism. As Norman Lourie explained in a talk given in November 1931, the purpose was "principally to stimulate Jewish boys and girls to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the heritage of the Jewish past, leading to a vision of the new Palestine as the spiritual pivot of our hopes." Yet personal *aliya* remained unmentioned; Habonim's official aims spoke only of stimulating Jewish boys and girls "to a realisation of their heritage as Jews and their responsibilities, in particular those relating to the upbuilding of Eretz Israel, which that heritage involves."

It was particularly in its educational methodology that Habonim modelled itself on the Boy Scouts, each unit, called *gedud*, being divided into *kevutzot* (patrols in Scouts jargon) and senior *bonim*, aged 15- 16, being given responsibility as *rashei kevutzot* (patrol leaders) over the younger *bonim*. A printed official "Habonim Handbook" outlined the

educational program. *Tzofiyut* (scoutcraft) was emphasized, as was a graded system of proficiency tests, applied individually to each *boneh*, in both scoutcraft and Jewish knowledge with emphasis on Zionist ideals and heroes. Thus, its ideological-educational-symbolism – such as the name, Habonim (builders) and the slogan "Call us not thy children (*banayich*), rather thy builders (*bonayich*)" – were firmly rooted in the Zionist understanding of the Jewish heritage. Typically, the first *gedud*, established in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, was named after the Zionist *chalutz* (pioneering) hero Joseph Trumpeldor.

In South Africa, the societal context in which Habonim functioned was very unusual, if not unique, in Jewish historical experience. For Jews shared in the privileged status of a European White minority, which dominated a majority population of "non-Whites" in a society based upon legally enforced racial discrimination. At the same time, the privileged White population was itself far from free of anti-Jewish stereotyping and prejudice, transplanted from the European heritage common to people of both Afrikaner and British stock. Moreover, Habonim emerged at a time when latent and private modes of antisemitism were being inflamed into public expressions, largely imported from Nazi Germany. Against this background, in 1930 the South African Quota Act all but put a stop to Jewish immigration, which was mostly from Eastern Europe, particularly Lithuania. In 1933 local National Socialist Greyshirt organisations sprouted while ascendant Afrikaner nationalism at large became increasingly antisemitic. Although never actually excluded from their citizenship privileges, Jews even in South Africa were being exposed uncomfortably to the problem of Jewish national homelessness that had generated the Zionist idea and movement from its beginnings. Given these tensions, over and above the deeply ingrained religio-ethnic consciousness of the mostly Litvak-stock Jews of South Africa, the new Habonim movement made phenomenal strides. Starting in March 1931 with a *gedud* of twelve boys whose *madrich* was Norman Lourie himself, by the end of 1933 there were 56 *gedudim*, comprising about 1100 members.

When the various Young Israel senior youth societies formed a united Zionist Youth Council as a department of the Zionist Federation in 1932, this Council sought the affiliation of Habonim. Since Norman Lourie was not only the founding leader (**manhig**) of Habonim, but also one of the founders of the Maccabi Sports Association in South Africa, the Zionist Youth Council feared that the close association between Habonim and Maccabi would lead to the absorption of Habonim's graduates into an equally independent Maccabi senior youth movement. The leaders of the Youth Council, wished to ensure that having completed their period in Habonim by the age of about 17, Habonim members would "graduate" into the senior Zionist youth societies of the Youth Council.

After considerable deliberation, by an agreement reached in 1936, Habonim consented to relinquish its special relationship with Maccabi and to affiliate to the Zionist Youth Council as the supreme governing body for Zionist youth in South Africa. The agreement also assured Habonim's autonomy and its right "to create senior *gedudim* for youth over the age of 16," provided this was done in co-ordination with the Youth Council. However, in practice, this agreement did not ensure that Habonim would be the sole youth movement. The dynamics of internal political division within the World Zionist Organization led to the proliferation of several separate Zionist youth movements affiliated to Zionist political parties. Hashomer Hatzair, a Marxist-orientated socialist movement, was founded in 1936 by a group of mostly East-European born young Jews. The example it set of single-minded *chalutz* (pioneering) *aliya* to *kibbutzim*, was later to exert considerable influence on Habonim's seniors. In 1934 the religious Hapoel Hamizrachi movement's youth section, called Mizrachi Hatzair, formed Hashomer Hadati, which later became Bnei Akiva. Also in the 1930s the burgeoning Revisionist Zionist Organization's Revisionist Zionist Youth Front emerged and formed the Betar youth movement. In 1945 the Revisionists' main rival, the Zionist Socialist Youth, formed a junior movement called Dror. Some of its founders had been Habonim *madrichim*. Indeed, in 1948 one of them moved back to become the first full-time *mazkir-klali* (Organizer-Secretary) of Habonim. In 1943 a few *madrichim* in Mayfair, Johannesburg, split from Habonim to found Bnei Zion. Their rationale was that Habonim was becoming too political in alignment with socialist Labour Zionism. Accordingly, Bnei Zion was fostered by the centrist-liberal, United Zionist Party, long the leading party on the Zionist Federation's Executive Council. It was only much later, in the 1960s that Reform or Progressive Judaism also created a Zionist youth movement, Maginim, which became Netzer in 1977. Habonim, for its part, found it increasingly necessary to retain its seniors within its own framework, not only as *madrichim* for the *bonim*, to which was added, in 1937, the *shtilim* age group from 8 to 12 years of age, but also as members of a new *shomrim* age group of 16 year olds and upwards. By 1948, when the State of Israel was established, these new movements had wholly replaced the former Young Israel societies of senior youth. Habonim, with about 3,000 members was, however, still by far the largest youth movement.

TRANSFORMATION: THE CHALLENGE OF PERSONAL ALIYA

During the World War II years and after, Habonim's new senior age group, *shomrim*, out of whose ranks were drawn *madrichim* of the younger age groups, began to absorb the ideal of kibbutz *chalutzit*. Moving away from the simple good citizenship Boy Scouts model, they advocated a more idealistically self-demanding educational programme

along the lines followed by the large Zionist youth movements in Europe and also in Palestine/Eretz-Israel. These movements demanded that young Zionists radically transform their lives not only by the act of *aliya* but also as socialist *chalutz Aliya*, which called for one to abjure middle class occupations and become a worker within the kibbutz commune.

A major stimulus for this development came from Habonim seniors who had given World War military service "up North". After exposure to knowledge of the inexpressible horrors of the Holocaust on the one hand, and to the inspiring life of the Yishuv (Zionist Jewish community) in Palestine/Eretz Israel on the other, they returned with a far more serious conception of the purposes of Habonim as a Zionist youth movement than had prevailed before the War. Not long after, in 1948, Habonim was influenced by the inspiring example set by a considerable number of its seniors among the estimated 646 *Machal* volunteers from South Africa who fought in Israel's War of Independence. After the war some of them founded a settlement in Israel actually named Moshav Habonim. Yet another factor of on-going influence was of an annual, year-long, "Post-Matriculation Course" in Jerusalem initiated in 1946. Open to all potential Zionist youth movement leaders, this course was the South African-initiated forerunner of the World Zionist Organisation's famous Machon leMadrichei Chutz L'Aretz (Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad) which attracted hundreds of youth every year from movements all over the world. From the outset, Habonim contributed the overwhelming majority of the South African contingents to this inspiring program. For many it was a formative life-changing experience. Exposed to an intensive full year of Hebrew and other Jewish studies and to living and working, albeit temporarily, in a kibbutz, as well as to the influence of other Zionist youth movements, particularly the more *chalutz*-centred youth movements in South America, the returning graduates of this course injected ever deepening *aliya*-centred content into Habonim. They provided the leadership core of successive generations of dedicated *madrichim*. Most importantly, full-time leader-organiser roles, most notably as *mazkir-klali* of the entire movement in South Africa, came to be drawn mainly from Machon graduates.

One result of the rising *chalutzic aliya* impetus in Habonim, which in turn further fostered it, was the invitation of *shlichim* (educational emissaries) from kibbutzim in Israel, generally for terms of two years. The first was a graduate of English Habonim from Kibbutz Kfar Blum, whose founding members included many from American and British Habonim and a few already from South Africa. Thereafter, successive *shlichim*, increasingly themselves graduates of the South African movement, have continued to come until this very day. Over the years, they made an enormous contribution to the guidance of

Habonim's development in South Africa, particularly with regard to the orientation towards kibbutz as the epitome of Zionist and personal self-fulfilment or *hagshama atzmit* ("self-realization") as was the customary term.

In 1943 a *hachsharah* (communal training farm) to prepare *chalutzim* for settlement in Israel had been established at Balfouria near Johannesburg. Open to all Zionist youth, its first trainees were members of Hashomer Hatzair, but they were soon joined by members of Habonim. The number who signed a "Chalutz Register," thereby connoting personal commitment to *chalutz aliya*, was constantly growing, and in 1947 the first independent Habonim *hachsharah* was established at Northcliff near Johannesburg. In March 1949, it moved to a bigger site at Brits in the northern Transvaal. It had become the largest of the four *hachsharot* existing in South Africa at the time, and an inspirational focal center for the movement. Moreover, in 1949, *chalutz olim* from Habonim joined the "Sabra" (Israel-born) youth movement founders of Kibbutz Tzora, which became the settlement containing the largest South African component in all of Israel. Although Habonim remained, in principle, unaligned with any Zionist political party, it was inexorably assuming a socialist ideological texture connected not only to the Kibbutz movement but also loosely oriented towards the mainstream Labour Party, Mapai, in Israel.

However, not all of Habonim's leaders were in favour of these developments. In the early 1950s controversy raged within Habonim over the accusation that the *chalutz* element was destroying the movement's non-political character and indoctrinating the youth in its ranks. Its first two official heads, titled *manhig*, Norman Lourie and Louis Krokin, had settled in Israel, but not in a kibbutz, and had been succeeded by another of its founding circle, Bertie Stern. He was acutely averse to the abandonment of the original Boy Scouts ethos and at one point even ordered the "suspension" of a whole group of *chalutz madrichim* pending investigation into their activities. Yet, by the mid-1950's the new course of Habonim's development as a movement emphasising personal aliya and *chaluziut* had triumphed. Bertie Stern had resigned and been replaced as *manhig* by Jules Browde, who although himself not an intending *chalutz* or even *oleh*, had a sympathetic understanding of the new course. He transformed the role of *manhig* tactfully from one of directing authority to one of mature guidance and advice. His perceptiveness and understanding made it possible for the movement to retain a fine balance in its development, successive generations of *mazkir-klali* (general-secretary) thenceforth becoming *de facto* heads of the movement. This status was accorded them by virtue of their personal example of commitment, expressed in suspending university studies or delaying their *aliya* for a year or two in order to devote themselves full-time to the movement.

Yet, it was not until the late 1950s that this de facto transformation of Habonim gained its official stamp. After extensive ideological fermentation, the 1959 National *Moetza* (governing conference) of Habonim reformulated the official aims of the movement. Although the new platform still affirmed the "independence" and "educational autonomy" of Habonim as well as the "right of every member" to his own religious and political convictions, it also stated that it regarded "*chalutz aliya* as the highest challenge facing its members." To be sure, "*chalutz*" was not defined exclusively in terms of kibbutz membership but as any form of collective settlement that incorporated an element of idealistic living in service to society in Israel. Although the platform posited a "demand... that its members face the challenge" it added "and reach personal self-realisation in their own way according to their own convictions." This satisfied those senior members of the movement who aspired to some form of co-operative group settlement in an urban ambience (although in practice this never materialized) as well as many others who intended *aliya* as individuals equipped with professions suited to such *chalutz*-like purposes, as doctors, teachers, and social-workers.

A first-ever Shomrim educational program began with guidelines for *chavura* (group) discussion of the 1959 Platform. It stated:

Aliya is not conceived as an ultimate aim in itself, nor is the definite intention of aliya an absolute requirement for continued membership. The conception is rather that of a personal challenge which calls out to the chaver on the basis of both that which he can contribute to Israel and that which he will personally derive from Israel (particularly in the spiritual sense).....The movement's aim in regard to aliya is to produce a type of person who will be emotionally and intellectually able to cope with this challenge and with the practical problems of its implementation if the challenge is accepted.

Viewed in the comparative perspective of Zionist youth movements in other countries, this relatively moderate and non-doctrinaire approach to aliya and the norm of university studies assured the intellectual vitality of Habonim as a movement whose *madrichim* stratum consisted almost entirely of university students. Whereas during the 1960's in some other countries, notably Argentina, dogmatic insistence on forfeiting university education in favour of trades suited to kibbutz led to a drastic decline in the intellectual viability of these movements, this was not so in South African Habonim. Largely by virtue of this factor, its viability outlasted that of its formerly stronger youth movement counterparts in South America.

The 1959 *Moetza* of Habonim also marked a turning point in respect of Habonim's participation in general Zionist Federation affairs. Although long an affiliate of the Zionist Youth Council, Habonim had disapproved of that body's party-politicised constitution.

Consequently, it had refused to take up its full proportion of representatives on that body's executive, consistently deputing only a nominal representation. Now it was decided to alter this policy on the grounds that it would serve Habonim's work better if it took up its rightful position as the leading Zionist youth organization in the country. Accordingly, for many years thereafter, Habonim provided successive chairpersons of the Zionist Youth Council. This increasing involvement in general Zionist Federation affairs reached its pinnacle in 1971 when, for the first time, Ichud Habonim even contested the elections to the World Zionist Congress in South Africa on an independent non-party plank. It emerged with a larger ballot than the veteran senior Zionist parties, Mizrachi and the Zionist Socialists (but not the Revisionist Zionists who emerged for the first time as the largest party). This election result entitled Habonim, for the first time, to independent representation on the Executive of the South African Zionist Federation.

Somewhat ironically, by the time Habonim had thus formalised its character as a youth movement committed to exposing its senior members to the challenge of *chalutz aliya* prioritizing the kibbutz, the impetus for this choice was in decline. Far-reaching changes within the new State of Israel itself had already eroded the former importance and magnetism of the kibbutz form of life. Israel was undergoing a great societal transformation attendant upon the integration of vast waves of new immigrants from Muslim countries, prodigious urban economic development and the opening of many new opportunities in professional fields. The majority of seniors in Habonim were reluctant to forfeit their university studies (a fair number always in the medical field) in order to become agricultural workers. When a particularly large group advanced its *aliya* in order to volunteer for military service in anticipation of the outbreak of the 1956 Sinai War, it drastically depleted the ranks of the already small number of potential *chalutzim*. This precipitated the closing of the combined youth movements' *hachsharah* farm at Oogies which had existed since 1953.

Concurrently, successive generations of graduates of the Machon LeMadrichei Chutz L'Aretz in Jerusalem, after exposure to Israeli youth movements as well as to colleagues from movements in other Diaspora countries, were advocating changes in the educational methodology of Habonim. They proposed various modifications of the traditional Boy Scouts methodology, notably introducing co-education of boys and girls in all units; greater age-group homogeneity; less emphasis on individual proficiency tests, uniforms and scoutcraft, and more attention to collective social activities, serious educational live-in study seminars for all age-groups and annual study courses in Israel for seniors. These courses came to be known as Machon Choref (Winter Institute). By 1961, this trend resulted in splitting the *bonim shichva* (age group) into two – *Bonim* (12

to 14) and *Sollelim* (path pavers)(14 to 16). At the same time, as ever, the annual three weeks long summer *Machaneh* (camp) continued to be the pinnacle project of each year, averaging some 1,000 campers of all age-groups from all of Southern Africa (that is including Rhodesia, and even some from the Belgian Congo).

An attendant influence of returning Machon LeMadrichei Chutz L'Aretz graduates was expressed in the growing sense of affinity with like-minded youth movements whether in Israel itself or in various diaspora Jewish communities. In 1959 this led to formal unification with fellow Habonim movements in the USA, Britain, Australia, and some kindred movements (not named Habonim) in South American countries and in Israel. The word, "Ichud" meaning "union of," was added to the name Habonim. But in practice this had little, if any, significance. More importantly, negotiations were initiated with two other South African Zionist youth movements with a view to unification. The first unification was in 1959 with Dror, the small junior youth movement of the by now defunct Zionist Socialist Youth. Little ideological difference, if any, existed between the two movements, especially since seniors of Dror had long been joining Habonim's settlers in kibbutzim such as Maayan Baruch and Tzora. Dror's membership and administrative office merged with Habonim's but not its name. The name Habonim-Dror was adopted much later, in the early 1980s, after a merger of kibbutz federations in Israel led to unification of Habonim with Dror movements in several countries.

Negotiations with the larger Bnei Zion movement ensued. Bnei Zion had rapidly attained a considerable membership and a fine record of educational and camping activities paralleling those of Habonim. Moreover, for a time it even was able to maintain a *hachsharah* (agricultural training farm) and produced a few *garinim* (groups of **olim**) mainly to Timorim (a *moshav shitufi*, i.e. collective settlement, as distinct from a kibbutz commune) and to Kibbutz Hasollelim. But it had found itself organizationally orphaned owing to the dissolution of the conventional General Zionist political party. For many years that party had been the largest in the S.A. Zionist Federation, but its leaders had now decided that after Israel's establishment there was no longer any point in [Zionist] political parties. So they transformed themselves into a non-party group named the United Zionist Association. Since differences between Habonim and Bnei Zion were now insignificant, unification was finally attained in 1961. This provided an infusion not only of members but also of several highly experienced madrichim, some of whom became key leaders of the movement. The augmented Ichud Habonim, encompassing about 3,600 members, accounted for well over half of the total of organized Jewish youth for the next three decades. In 1966, a census conducted by the Zionist Youth Council revealed a total membership of 6,800 distributed as follows: Habonim 3618, Betar 1,483, Bnei

Akiva 1478, Hashomer Hatzair 221. Habonim's various annual winter study-seminars for all age groups and its enormous summer camps at a permanent self-owned campsite established in the early 1960s at Onrus in the Cape, (replacing leased sites such as Nahoon, Leaches Bay and Somerset West) encompassed many thousands of Jewish youth over the years. Sound statistics are not available, but it can confidently be estimated that a far greater percentage of youth was involved than was the case in other Jewish communities. Indicative of this, a reliable research_project on South African Jewry conducted in 2020 showed that 45 per cent of all Jews still living there had attended youth movement camps, 33 per cent camps of Habonim-Dror and 20 per cent Bnei Akiva.

Throughout the period between 1948 and the 1980s, although experiencing relative crests and troughs, Habonim's membership averaged about 3,000. Its units were dispersed, not only in the main cities but also in small towns from Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) to Cape Town. It maintained successive "bayits" (*batim* or commune homes). These were occupied by full-time movement organizers and *shlichim*, and served as foci for movement activities. Habonim-Dror sent hundreds of its senior members on annual study visits to Israel, especially the course known as Machon Hachoref.

APARTHEID: HABONIM'S DILEMMA

Throughout the above-described developments, Habonim was functioning within privileged White South African society, systematized after the Afrikaner National Party's ascent to power in 1948 as the racist regime infamously known as "apartheid." How did its leadership relate to this morally problematic reality? The bottom-line answer is that, however ambivalently and agonizingly (internal controversy was chronic and at times bitter, but unrecorded) Habonim complied with the "non-political involvement as a community" policy adopted by the institutional leadership in its entirety – the Jewish Board of Deputies, the Zionist Federation, the Orthodox rabbinate and also the Reform rabbinate. Habonim's compliance meant that, as an organization, it was obligated to refrain from involvement in active resistance. This precluded public voicing of condemnation specifying "apartheid." Of course, as an individual private person, any member of Habonim could speak and act on his or her personal convictions. In fact, throughout these years, some members, and many more former members, did participate personally in active resistance to the apartheid regime or in opposition to, or contravention of, particular manifestations of it. In light of the grave personal risks at stake, the actions of some of these people can be called courageous. However, this epithet cannot be applied collectively to Habonim any more than to the Jewish community's leadership as a whole.

Nevertheless, it can be said that as an educational organ Habonim played a role in the generation of social awareness and moral convictions acutely averse to the overall apartheid-induced milieu of racist attitudes and norms. It had to hide its intent, since by the late 1950s the authorities had already evinced suspicion of the small Hashomer Hatzair youth movement's known socialist teachings, and there was reason to believe that they were suspicious of what was being taught in Habonim as well. So, for example, the text of the new Shomrim educational program of 1959 was carefully designed to hide its subversive ideational intent. In practice, Habonim performed its role spontaneously as an emanation of the values it sought to exemplify. For the whole Habonim ambience was steeped in values not only of *chaverut* (comradeship) but also of humanism, equality, social-justice and social-democracy – all enveloped in the idealized Zionist vision of Jewish self-emancipation and human equality epitomized above all by the kibbutz. It was this factor that had the effect, whether conscious or not, of sensitizing one to the gross racism, inequality, discrimination, exploitation and humiliation suffered by all in South Africa whom the apartheid system did not classify as Whites. In very many cases, this acutely subverted the normative pattern of unquestioning conformity instilled in every White child not only through formal schooling but also in the home, not excepting the average Jewish home.

At the same time, the essentially Zionist ideological purposes of Habonim channeled these sensitivities and convictions towards prioritized identification with the historical experience, heritage and problems of Jewish peoplehood. In ideological terms, Habonim provided a Zionist resolution to the Jew's moral dilemma as privileged participants in a society governed by a regime of racial discrimination. Its rationale was the contention that the moral dilemmas plaguing the conscience of thinking Jews in South Africa constituted no more than a particular dimension of the general condition of the Jews, as long as they were a diasporic minority everywhere; nowhere a self-determining majority in its own homeland. Habonim endorsed the premise that both Judaism's values and the historic experience of the Jewish people imposed an imperative upon South African Jews to oppose apartheid actively. However, it held that instructing Jewish youth, as the community's leadership institutions did, that if they felt they must oppose the evils of society they should do so not as Jews, but purely as individual citizens, was virtually a renunciation of the relevance of Jewish values to the actual lives of Jews. It dichotomized "the Jew" and "the man" [today one should say "person"], thereby revealing the moral deficiency of Jewishness in the peculiar South African variety of *galut*, (exile, in the sense of the condition of Jewish national homelessness). At the same time, if Jewish communal leadership was false to authentic Jewishness because it evaded its universalist imperatives, so too were those Jewish radical activists, no matter how heroic, who negated its particularist Zionist imperatives and advocated sacrifice of the Jewish

community's safety in the interests of a universal cause. Only in an autonomous Jewish society could Jews hope to harmonise the equally valid imperatives of Jewish particularism and universalism as envisaged in the Biblical prophetic tradition. In short, the Habonim message was: compliant participation in the privileged white caste of South Africa is unconscionable; radically changing the course of one's own life through *aliya* is the commanding option.

Of course, the challenge of radically transforming one's life by the chosen act of personal *aliya* has never been easy. Only a small portion of those who passed through Habonim has seen its way to sustained fulfilment of this ideal. However, throughout the years a substantial percentage of Habonim-Dror seniors did settle for good in Israel. Those who came in *garinim* (groups, settling together on a kibbutz) mainly joined Kibbutz Tzora, Kibbutz Yizrael, and Kibbutz Nir Eliyahu. Many more came as individuals, settling as qualified professionals in the towns or initially undertaking studies at Israeli universities. Their contribution to Israeli society, and that of their offspring, has been profuse in a variety of fields. Accurate statistics are elusive but, certainly, a high percentage left the kibbutz framework and adopted other occupations in Israel's cities. A considerable number left Israel altogether, some returning to South Africa, others moving to North America, Britain and Australia. It is noteworthy that some graduates of Habonim-Dror who never left South Africa, as well as not a few who ended up in those other countries, came to occupy important positions of leadership and responsibility in their local Jewish communities.

EFFECTS OF THE CHANGING REALITY IN ISRAEL AND SOUTH AFRICA

The contextual reality of the Jewish condition in the world generally as well as locally in South Africa had always influenced and shaped the ideological and practical character of Habonim-Dror. Personal *aliya* was a profoundly meaningful life choice in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the emergence of Israel as a small state, struggling desperately to establish and defend itself while trying to absorb and rehabilitate waves of dispossessed and educationally deprived immigrants whose numbers exceeded its pre-independence Jewish population. The motivation for choosing *aliya* was deep identification with, and aspiration to participate in, what one perceived as the most fateful liberating project in the millennial history of the Jewish people. One's *aliya* meant answering the passionate appeal -- inspiringly issued by David Ben-Gurion and other prominent leaders-- to young Jews who were endowed with skills and values derived from upbringing in a free and well-developed western society. Throwing in one's lot with the nascent project of Jewish statehood hopefully "to build and also to be built" as a Jewish person was truly not just a cliché.

But the contextual reality that gave *aliya* this compelling meaning underwent very significant changes in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Foremost among these changes was the transformed sociological and political reality of Israel and, with it, the waning of the Zionist organization in the Diaspora. The political hegemony of Labour Zionism disintegrated, and the kibbutz form of settlement in Israel, which had long exemplified the principal ideals of Habonim-Dror, lost its former elite status and influence in Israeli society and politics. The nature of the kibbutz as a commune embodying the pristine socialist principle of equality "from each according to one's ability, to each according to one's needs" gave way to categories of kibbutz membership, differentiation in salaries and fee payments for services such as meals in the common dining room. In the 1980s, the Kibbutz movement underwent a severe economic crisis, one side effect of which was decline in its concern for youth movements in the Jewish diaspora. Those kibbutzim that managed to thrive economically thanks to successful manufacturing enterprises virtually became collective capitalists. Since it turned out that this enabled them to preserve commune equality better than poorer kibbutzim, it even came to be said, ironically, that in order to sustain its socialism the kibbutz had to become a capitalist collective. Overall, within three decades, the phenomenally thriving development of Israel, in all spheres—population growth, economic viability, military power, cultural creativity – had profoundly transformed the contextual reality into which any *oleh* entered. In the 1950s, any young *oleh* from South Africa underwent an enormous decline in standard of living and occupational or professional prospects. By the end of the century quite the opposite was beginning to be the case. Today *aliya* can potentially confer not only an enhanced quality of life in a culturally Jewish sense but also in overall quality of life.

By contrast, another far-reaching transformation of the contextual reality in which Zionist youth movements had to function resulted from the dramatic political ascendance of the right-wing parties and civic movements in Israel after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. This greatly boosted the impact of the national-religious Gush-Emunim model of messianic-inspired settlement of the territories occupied since the Six-Day War of 1967. Ever since, Israel, the nationhood embodiment of recovered Jewish freedom and creativity, has incrementally forfeited its much vaunted foundational image as a "light- unto- the nations;" as a beacon of progressive democracy and liberal humanistic values. Particularly in South Africa, how could one evade the disturbing similarities between the odious apartheid-era and Israel's occupation and settlement regime; the shameful new reality of the Jewish people's inexorable rule over another people. The consequent erosion of Israel's former magnetism for the type of person whose character Habonim-Dror aspires

to shape is self-evident to this day. This has certainly transformed the movement, even if one might still add, not quite beyond recognition.

Concurrently with these developments, the World Zionist Organization, which incorporated and financed youth movements such as Habonim-Dror, was declining drastically in resources and influence. It became a subordinate dependent of the fund-raising component of the Jewish Agency for Israel, and lost its former preeminent status, at first in Israel itself and in due course within South Africa's Jewish community. These developments weakened Zionist youth movements everywhere. Thanks to the relatively longer staying power of the local Zionist Federation, the South African youth movements held out longer than most. Even so, the early 1980s were the last years of sustained vibrancy for South African Habonim-Dror. Attendance at the annual summer *machaneh* remained high and a new *chalutz garin* was formed and chose to co-found Kibbutz Tuval in the Galilee. However, it proved to be the last of its kind. Most of its members soon left the kibbutz, some leaving Israel altogether. In South Africa, rapid decline ensued in the following decades. The weakened Zionist Federation reduced its financial support of the youth movements and this meant reduction in the number of *shlichim* from Israel. They were no longer chosen exclusively from kibbutzim, and the assignment of some was broadened to cover youth activities in general rather than dedication to each particular youth movement. Whereas at the end of the 80s, Habonim-Dror had benefited from three or four *shlichim* divided between Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, in 1999 it had just one *shaliach*, who was based in Johannesburg, and with difficulty was granted a one third stake in another *shaliach's* work in Cape Town. The funding of youth movement facilities in all centres was cut, falling by 70 per cent between 1988 and 1998. Habonim lost its *batim* (movement centres), which had increasingly served as the sole meeting place for the movement's various *shchavot* (age groups). As regular weekly meetings of all units faded away, *machaneh* became the movement's almost all-consuming focus, and registration for *machaneh* virtually became the sole basis for membership of the movement. It also had to rely on generation of a large profit on its *machaneh* in order to fund its overall functioning as a youth movement.

Largely as an outcome of programming for these camps, the multiplication of single-year, gender-mixed *shchavot* (age-groups of the movement's units) created a major structural and programmatic change in the whole year's regular activity. The Boy Scouts movement model, based on separate girls' and boys' units, decentralized with seniors (*rashei kevutzot* nicknamed "roks") leading younger members, was wholly abandoned. Although the first new *shichva* –sollelim – had been created for the age group 15-16 as early as 1958, in the 1970s this was expanded further in accordance with government school age-

grades. By the year 2000 the structure was: Garinim (seeds) (8-10 years old) ; Shtilim (saplings) (10-12); Bonim (builders) (12-13); Amelim (workers) (13-14); Sollelim (pavers) (14-16); Sayarim (scouts) (15-16); Shomrim (guards) (16-17); Bogrim (graduates) (17-18 and upwards). A related change in the movement was the waning of uniform dress. Khaki Scout-type dress with scarves and woggles, a legacy of the collectivist, quasi-military milieu from the Anglo-Boer war through two world wars, fell away in the individualistic, liberated, anti-military milieu of the 1960s and after. What remained was blue shirts such as had long been adopted by some Israeli *chalutzic* youth movements. By contrast, in respect of the movement's organizational management and leadership structure, nomenclature was the only change since the 1980s; for example, the top governing body was called *veida* rather than *moetza*. However, the titular head of Habonim-Dror, still called *manhig*, remained a senior graduate of the movement located in South Africa. Theo Kopenhagen, who had been a *madrich* in the mid-1960s, replaced Jules Browde in that role in 1985 and Errol Anstey, of the early 1980s generation of *madrachim*, succeeded him in 2000.

In consequence of all these developments, Habonim-Dror lost vitality in its every-day functioning, such as frequency of group meetings in each age group, *madrich* training programmes, and winter study seminars. This severely weakened the year-round role-modelling *madrich-CHANICH* relationship so essential to the nature of a youth movement. An additional factor, the chronic threat to personal security caused by the endemic crime wave that has engulfed South Africa from the early 1990s onwards, has necessitated centralization of all activities in a very small number of meeting places. By 1999 the movement's radical decline became shockingly manifest when even its main activity, the summer *machaneh*, attracted less than 250 *chanichim*.

Yet, quite remarkably, in the early 2000s, a new generation of innovative leaders and *shlichim* managed to revive Habonim-Dror. Their efforts are described in a booklet written and published under the evocative title "Like a Phoenix from the Ashes" by two of the major shapers of this revival. Their initiatives included campaigning for revived units in various centres and the conduct of week-end seminars and periodic mini-camps for the various *shchavot*. By 2009, *machaneh* numbers had greatly increased, and the movement had four full-time workers. Moreover, evincing unprecedented enterprise, this early 21st century generation of leaders created a fundraising Foundation and Campsite Upgrade and Renewal Project which, in combination, went a long way toward making Habonim-Dror financially self-dependent. The key element of this achievement was making it profitable to rent out the movement's most valuable possession, its magnificent Onrus campsite, during the 11 months of the year between *machanot*. The whole revival

process was set off in Cape Town but broadened to Johannesburg when some of its key leaders undertook full-time work as organizers in the Johannesburg office headquarters of Habonim-Dror.

In addition to the afore-mentioned ambient factors of change, account should be taken of the powerful impact of the transformative local South African reality, which culminated in the astonishing dismantling of the apartheid regime and birth of a new democratic South African society in 1994. In the mid-1980s a new phase of broad-spectrum opposition to the repressive apartheid regime was being generated by what was called the United Democratic Front. Concurrently, reformed ideological rhetoric within the Afrikaner public and even the government began to tolerate expressions of opposition to apartheid racism by newly formed Jewish groups, such as "Jews for Justice," composed largely of young people, many of whom had passed through phases of the Habonim-Dror experience. In this context, some degree of involvement with local progressive political activity began to develop within Habonim-Dror itself. The turn of the 21st century saw a range of liberal outreach projects such as the conduct of some mini-camps for black township children in the framework of the annual Habonim-Dror *machaneh*. After 1994, stories about Jews who had been active in heroic anti-apartheid politics, not only such as the liberal Helen Suzman but radicals, who were also self-declared anti-Zionists, such as Joe Slovo, became a source of inspiration. A somewhat mythologized picture of the movement's role in the anti-apartheid struggle, gave impetus to the efforts to redefine a progressive **local** role for Habonim-Dror. This began to rival *aliya* and *chalutzit* as focal points of debate in the movement. Such ideological ambiguity resulted in development of two competing role models exemplified by different leading *madrichim*. On the one hand, fulfilment of the movement's seminal ideal of "*livnot u'lehibanot* (building and being built) through *aliya* and identification with left-wing/liberal Zionist activism; on the other hand, local engagement with progressive development of the new post-apartheid South Africa.

Over the last decade or so, the tension between these competing poles of identification has been modified somewhat. But the fact remains: in the years following the dramatic establishment of the new post-apartheid South Africa, no more than a trickle of *olim* has emanated from the ranks of Habonim's leading *madrichim*, whereas some of their number became active in civil society organizations within the new South African ambience. A striking example was the innovative development of a youth organization called Equal Education, in whose development some ex-Habonim *madrichim* played a major role. Indeed they consciously modelled it on their Habonim experience. In a sense, Habonim-Dror began to see itself as advocate and spearhead of the Jewish community's

active engagement with the building of South Africa's new non-racial society. Another manifestation of local activism in the 1990s, although one only indirectly emanating from the Habonim-Dror experience, was the unprecedented multi-racial children's mass choirs of the remarkable Sharon Katz's "Peace Train" initiative, evocative of the movement's camp train experience.

Concurrent with the right-wing political transformation in Israel, the waning of the World Zionist Organization, and the increasingly problematic image of Israel, tarnished by the colonizing settler regime in occupied territory, was the changing character of the entire Jewish community within South Africa itself. This was marked by the great expansion of Jewish day school education and South African Jewry's phenomenal turn to orthodox religiosity. Jewish day school attendance increased vastly, reaching about 50 percent of school-age persons by the mid-1980s and rising to above 80 percent by the turn of the century. Full-time schooling, both primary and secondary up to matriculation, in an exponentially expanding religious-oriented framework, tended to supplant the Jewish educational role of the youth movements. Moreover, within the major schooling network – the King-David schools – and not only the dedicatedly orthodox-religious Yeshiva College framework, inherent favouring of the orthodox-religious Bnei Akiva youth movement worked to the detriment of the largely secular-oriented Habonim-Dror movement. When the community's Jewish day schools fostered their own informal extra-curricular retreats modelled on youth movement methods, they gave preference to Bnei Akiva madrichim in their running. By the 1990s the authority of the orthodox rabbinate and the influence of burgeoning orthodox institutions, ranging from schools, yeshivas and shtibel congregations to the "return to religion" outreach activities of Ohr Someach and Chabad, created an ambience that made increasing *frumkeit* (religious piety) an exponential norm within the Jewish community.

In this context, Bnei Akiva flourished. By the 1990s it exceeded Habonim-Dror in size and activity. Bnei Akiva's identification with the religious-redemptionist settlement movement in the occupied territories was quite the antithesis of Habonim-Dror's repulsion from the same. Many of Bnei Akiva's olim actually chose to join these settlements. Habonim-Dror, by dint of the intensified conviction with which it identified with left-wing opposition to the occupation and settlement movement, came to be the ideological adversary not only of Bnei Akiva but also of the entire community's prevailing religious-nationalist establishment. This led to defamatory accusations, typical of right-wing regimentation pressures. The sharply critical -- but in fact also deeply caring -- attitude of some of Habonim's leaders toward Israeli government policies in relation to the Palestinians was facilely labelled "anti-Israel." Indeed, at one point in 2003 the

director of the S.A. Board of Jewish Education instigated a ban (later revoked) on Habonim-Dror activity within the King David Schools.

THE CONTEMPORARY IDEOLOGICAL POSITION OF HABONIM-DROR

In the first two decades of this century, the leadership of Habonim-Dror has been engaged in ambivalent ideological deliberation arising from dilemmas that did not exist in earlier times. Its principal dilemma arises from the powerful resonance of B.D.S. in South Africa, in a sense the mother of all B.D.S campaigns in the world owing to the pivotal role of the apartheid accusation in B.D.S. propaganda. After all, Habonim-Dror's disaffection from Israel's current policies in relation to the Palestinians accords, up to a certain point, with B.D.S.' critique; but certainly not with B.D.S.' rabid hostility and effort to deligitimize Jewish statehood. How to navigate between a caring and positive liberal Zionist critique on the one hand, and the inherent defamatory anti-Zionism of B.D.S. on the other, is a chronic challenge, compounded by the Jewish community's unquestioning loyalty to Israel's policies in regard to the West Bank occupation and its Jewish settlers. How does one steer between these two pressures? Another unprecedented dilemma, although perhaps just transient, relates to S.A. Habonim-Dror's bond with the world Habonim-Dror movement, which, in turn, is rooted in, if not directed by, the united kibbutz movement in Israel. During the last decade, dissension developed between the latter and a new manifestation of idealist chalutzit produced by some Israeli youth movement graduates. Exemplified by a movement called Dror-Israel, it pioneers a form of urban commune, the "Irbutz," altruistically dedicated to educational and social service to the surrounding community. This proffered an attractive ideological and practical aliya option very much in tune with the South African movement's declared ideals. At times its leaders have felt torn between these old and new policy options for aliya. However, the South African movement has never embraced the urban commune model formally and less than a handful of movement leaders have adopted it personally.

Serious ideological deliberation and self-definition has not been lacking in recent years. Over the past two decades the movement's aims have been reformulated in terms of three "pillars": Judaism, Zionism and Socialism. Actually, the "Judaism pillar" no more than bolstered a long-existent affirmation of religious tradition in the movement's activities. For, from the beginnings of Habonim, and even when the orthodox-religious Bnei Akiva offered an alternative home, Habonim's leadership included many orthodox observant persons, notable among them the children of the Chief Rabbis in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. Several seniors of Habonim even went on to become eminent Orthodox rabbis. A few became Reform rabbis. It is reflective of the phenomenal

turn to religion in the entire Jewish community that in the 1970s a few of Habonim-Dror's central activists, including one who had served a term as *mazkir-klali* (director general) became *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox). In the early 2,000s a notably innovative expression of the Judaism "pillar" was the formative role of Habonim-Dror's leaders in initiating a South African version of the phenomenal Limmud study programme that had been created within British Jewry.

The "socialism pillar" has generated indecisive deliberation, expressed in rather vague reformulations such as "Social Justice," and "Post-Socialism." In a 2017 declaration of principles, South African Habonim-Dror said that it "does not classify itself as socialist but rather supports economic and social equality." It stated that the members of Habonim-Dror define themselves "as politically and economically left-wing," and spoke of "equality and service to humanity" rather than socialism.

The "Zionism pillar" has acquired clearer redefinition. At the December 2001 *Veida* "Chalutzic aliya" was recognised as the "hagshama" (fulfilment) of the "Zionism pillar" alone rather than as the singular ideal of the movement. Moreover, the concept "*chalutzit*" has decidedly been detached from the kibbutz ideal. It is interpreted as any form of idealistic activism that emanates from the movement's basic values. This connotes strong identification with left-wing Zionist opposition to Israel's prevailing occupation and settlement regime. The 2001 *veida* stated explicitly that one could "achieve chalutzic aliyah by protesting against any policies of the government of Israel that contradict the principles and values of Habonim-Dror." At the 2005 *veida*, a subsequent generation reiterated the former "aliya as highest aim" phrase, although members were enjoined only to "explore Israel" as a "viable option." A 2017 statement of principles ventured to specify its criticisms of Israel's policies in minute detail, in terms adopted from what would be regarded within Israel as the extreme-left; not only advocacy of a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital, but also deploring "disowning, displacement and oppression of the Palestinian people" and "perpetration of human rights abuses." Publication of this statement portended so much acrimony in the Jewish community that it was deemed judicious to remove it from the Habonim-Dror internet site.

Overall, although in principle the act of personal aliya has repeatedly been reaffirmed as "the highest fulfillment of Zionism," in practice it has been much reduced in importance, while identification with left-wing opposition to Israel's empowered largely national-religious right-wing policies is explicitly invoked. Today Habonim-Dror simply "encourages its members to live in Israel in a manner which positively contributes to Israeli society,"

whilst adding that it "also places immense value on active citizenship and thus strives to educate its members on South Africa and encourages them to be active in creating a just and equal post-apartheid South Africa."

In terms of quantity, South African Habonim-Dror has lost its record of consistently being the largest and most potent local youth movement. Yet, measured by the focal activity of all youth movement life, the annual *machaneh*, it currently competes well with its major rival, Bnei Akiva, although less in Johannesburg than in Cape Town. After its drastic decline in numbers in 1999, from 2010 to 2012 it began to match Bnei Akiva's numbers and even exceed them. A drop ensued after 2014, although it was again on a par by 2019. On the other hand, the intellectual and moral character of its recent and contemporary leadership equals that of previous generations. Significantly indicative of this, it has no difficulty in drawing talented full-time directors for service in its office headquarters from within its rank of seniors. Remarkably, in recent years at least as many females as males have served as Mazkir-Klali. Moreover, as an educational and social agency Habonim-Dror has become a model of progressive policy and programming. Recent and present generations of Habonim-Dror's leadership evince exemplary understanding and inclusiveness in regard to gender equality, homosexuality and transgender accommodations, matters that were unknown to, or disregarded by, earlier generations. Despite the movement's overwhelming focus on its pivotal *machaneh* at its beautiful Onrus site in the Cape, it still manages also to conduct a variety of mini-camps, leadership seminars and conferences. Overall, it continues to engage a considerable section of Jewish youth in a range of vibrant activities focused primarily on strong identification with Israel. This is meaningfully expressed in study tours to Israel, most notably its ten-month-long post-school matriculation course (curiously labelled "shnat") that has superseded the former Machon Lemadrichei Chutz L'Aretz experience, and in many respects invigorated and diversified it.

In sum, Habonim-Dror certainly has changed a lot but then so have Israel, South Africa and Zionism. It remains a meaningful, vibrant, and -- most imposingly of all its attributes-- an autonomous, self-determining body, true to the original distinctive character of the youth movement phenomenon. Moreover, in the reality of today's markedly orthodox national-religious, right-wing aligned Jewish community, Habonim-Dror may be said to provide a bold and significant counter-force of liberal-Zionism.

A CONCLUDING COMMENT

After ninety years, it might perhaps be surmised that, sans the Boy Scout trappings, Habonim-Dror is returning to its original primary purpose: simply character-building in the process of Jewish identity-formation. This in itself is admirable. However, the historical record shows that the amazing modern phenomenon of Jewish youth movements, of which Habonim-Dror was but one of many in various countries, was conceived in the matrix of Zionist national regeneration as actuated and realized in the State of Israel and its society. This seems to have been the contextual determinant of its amazing vitality and thriving as a movement. So, one may wonder whether the genuine heritage of South African Habonim-Dror can be carried onward if its leaders detach themselves disproportionately from that matrix.

Be that as it may, after ninety years of Habonim's existence in South Africa, one stands in awe at the enormity of this youth movement's influence upon South African Jewry and of its contributions to Israeli society, indeed as well as to some other Jewish communities and to "*tikun olam*" generally. All of this, in addition to the networks of enduring friendship, not to speak of the many life partnerships in marriage, rooted in the Habonim experience. Any attempt to list the graduates who have come to play important roles in the South African Jewish community and in the life of Israel, or to socially progressive activism in many places, would be an invidious task involving the risk of inadvertently omitting many more than those selected for mention.

In the final analysis, one may pin-point three qualities that characterise the deepest and most lasting impact of the Habonim-Dror life experience (although not necessarily in this order). These seem to have subsumed or outlived the more ideological *chalutz aliya* ethos. They are: firstly, wonderfully sincere and enduring friendship relationships rooted in formative common experience of *machanot* and other aspects of life in the youth movement; secondly, enduring adherence to an essentially Zionist, Israel-centred understanding of Jewish peoplehood, notwithstanding critical discontents; thirdly, a general world-outlook based on humanistic social values. Altogether a superb heritage.