

HABONIM AT 90: GIDDY SHIMONI'S COMMENT

By its very nature the youth movement experience is limited to only a few years, at most about a decade within the span of 90 years of the movement's existence to date. In composing the historical essay that was sent to registrants for today's HED session, it was my hope it would satisfy the natural curiosity of everyone here to know how it has developed **after** one's own time, or perhaps also **before** one's own time

HED has been a most enjoyable and gratifying experience. Under Covid19 lockdowns and social restrictions, each time I entered the HED Zoom session I, felt like I was going out for a social-cultural *peula*. There has been admirable emphasis on the creative tikkun-olam accomplishments of chaverim who credited what they have done to formative experiences in Habonim-Dror. I applaud this. However, please allow me to shift the focus from the role of individuals to the historically traced story of Habonim-Dror, in other words the broader mega-context in which Habonim-Dror as a movement arose, functioned, and has developed to this day.

At the conclusion of the essay, I allowed myself a personal comment. I noted that "the 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. 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."

The comment I shall now make focusses on that matrix – Zionism. Allow me to do so candidly, in an appreciative yet critical spirit. We should recognize that Zionism is many things, sentiment, religious belief, political movement and so on, but in the final analysis, for better or worse, it is a phenomenon of **nationalism**. Ipso facto, we of Habonim-Dror were/are nationalists! I say "for better or for worse" because nationalism can be a greatly benevolent liberating force but it can also become a malevolent repressive force. Was it not the horrendous moral degeneration of initially liberating European nationalisms that fueled the rejection, dispossession, and ultimate annihilation of Jewish minorities?

Because of this potentiality of nationalism to be like a double-edged sword, Martin Buber once likened nationalism to a fever, i.e. the body's auto-therapeutic reaction to infection; the body's necessary way of coping with a state of illness. To stretch the analogy a little more: The fever translates into "idealism", nationalist idealism. But make no mistake, idealism too is not in itself a positive value. Its moral value depends upon **the cause** that is served by the idealists. Remember, also Nazi SS officers were dedicated idealists!! Buber's point is that once health is restored, the fever— that is to say the idealistic fervor – should pass. But artificially perpetuating the fever would aggravate the condition of illness rather than restore healthy normalcy. To apply Buber's analogy more specifically, note that the Zionist ideology indeed issues from a certain **diagnosis**, namely that the illness of travail and distress suffered by Jews even

after formal emancipation in modern times—indeed largely in reaction to emancipation – was caused by the anomalous condition of perpetual national homelessness. In diagnosing the Jewish problem, this is where Zionism's founders, Pinsker and Herzl, and the entire spectrum of its thinkers, put their finger. Buber's point was that perpetuation of the fever turns benign nationalism into malignant hyper-nationalism. In Hebrew we have a clearer terminological distinction: לאומנות in contrast to לאומיות.

What is the critical distinguishing mark of לאומנות (hyper-nationalism)? It is the collective dimension of "do not unto the other what you would not have the other do unto you"; it is denying to the other the right to national self-fulfilment that one demands for oneself. It is harboring a sense of inherent superiority and privilege over other peoples and minorities. It is claiming an **absolutely exclusive right** to one's divinely "promised" land even if it is the domicile also of another people (Time limits here not permitting illustration of this phenomenon not only on Israel's political periphery but also within Israel's current Zionist political mainstream, I should at least allude to M.Ks Bezalel Smotrich and Naftali Bennet). So **Buber's** point was: These were/are the manifestations of perpetuated fever. **My** point in borrowing this analogy is: This indeed is what might be happening to Zionism. Some would say it has already happened.

But one must not oversimplify or essentialize, that is to say depict one part of the whole as its entirety. Zionism is not a monolith. It is, so to speak, a family name; it has always encompassed a variety of forms and streams. The Habonim-Dror youth movement was but one of them. It was a form moderated by liberal, humanistic, values, in turn much influenced by our local South African societal environment; by repulsion from its systemic racism, which inhered most particularly in Afrikaner nationalism. At the same time, truth to tell, the pristine Zionist narrative that Habonim madrichim imparted to their chanichim was oversimplified and oblivious to many moral failings. Examples of such failings are not only the many present moral travesties committed by the military occupation regime in the occupied territories and unconscionable perversions perpetrated by extremist segments of its settler population, but even past Zionist leadership's considerable, if only partial, responsibility or even culpability for the Palestinian refugee problem, and acts of "impurity of arms" by Israeli military forces in and beyond the 1948 war. We have to admit that we have been oblivious to such shameful truths. They were for the most part absent from the Zionist narrative conveyed to chaverim in all of the Zionist youth movements, including Habonim. We know of them today and this is acknowledged by many of us, although there are probably many who still deny it, some through willful blindness, others perhaps through cognitive dissonance.

Yet none of these moral faults and failings should be detached from the context of imperfect reality; the imperfect reality of human inter-group relations and conflicts. They do not in themselves invalidate the Zionist diagnosis or the Zionist cause and its phenomenal emanation, the State of Israel, any more than such aberrations as – to

give just one grave example—the allies' bombing of Dresden, negates the justification of war against Nazi Germany, or – to give another example – the horrendous annihilation of aboriginal populations negates the right to existence of Australia or the U.S.A. Yet acknowledging past sins is important, not because it should invalidate a rightful cause, but because it should forewarn us of the slippery slope into fevered hyper-nationalism.

If one asks: "What is the historical explanation for what has happened to Zionism?" the answer is quite plain. Almost from its beginnings, there have been ideological elements and political streams within Zionism that tended towards hyper-nationalism. In my historical writing on Zionism, I have traced and explained these, but the limited time at my disposal here merely allows me a very summary statement: the hyper-nationalist fever was peripheral. It was never mainstream. But it began a remarkable ascendancy within Zionism from the time that its originally peripheral national-religious stream underwent a radical ideological transformation – and this may be located in the period from the seemingly miraculous victory of the 6 Day war in 1967 through the traumatic aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Like a great magnet, it attracted and absorbed and co-opted several secular strands, also very idealistic, mainly from Revisionist Zionism but also from the Labor Zionist movement, and thereafter has even co-opted Haredi (ultra-orthodox) groups that had never been Zionist. Indeed, today Haredim, concentrated in a few new cities constitute a major segment of the settler population in the occupied territories. All of this has generated the exponential settlement project motivated, with tenacious idealism, by the hyper-nationalist, irredentist drive to incorporation of *eretz Israel hashlema* into the sovereign State of Israel, initially de facto (as it already is today) and ultimately de jure. And this purposefully without incorporating its Palestinian population into its democratic constitution; a putative "solution" which, at best, will institutionalize something akin to the "Homelands-Bantustan" solution that was attempted by Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa. This hyper-nationalist solution is leading ineluctably into the abyss that consumed South African society. Surely, for us, stemming from South Africa, this is particularly poignant. The direction being taken is something truly comparable to the Grand Apartheid "homelands" system. One cannot but be cast back to the sense of **alienation** from one's societal environment which one felt in South Africa; a sense which Habonim-Dror engendered in many of its chanichim. Personally, I must confess that I experience this revived sense of alienation even in Jerusalem where "annexed" Palestinians constitute a third of its population and provide the larger part of Jerusalem's unskilled labor force. And, they are politically and socially underprivileged. This is the contemporary context in which we should understand and, in my opinion appreciate, what Habonim-Dror has to cope with as a **Zionist** youth movement today.

Having heard me out, and if you share the sense of alienation which I describe, you may well ask: Does this mean that we must abjure Zionism? By "we" I mean past and present adherents of Habonim-Dror's mode of Zionism. If one is repulsed by what mainstream Zionism has become, should one now say I can no longer be a Zionist? Or

even become an anti-Zionist and do things like support B.D.S? To this I must respond by emphatically offering my personal view. It is **no** to all of these things. I most assuredly consider myself a Zionist. In the present format, I can explicate only very telegraphically: My stand derives from the study of Zionist ideology in all of its variety, which allows me to spell out what are the fundamental postulates of Zionism. These postulates are 1. The entity known as Jews is an ethnic entity, a people (today in part a nation; a question of definition that I cannot explicate right now). Note the key postulate of Herzl in his *Der Judenstaat*: "Wir sind ein Volk." 2. As such the Jewish people has an existential need, and a moral entitlement for national self-determination and self-fulfillment. Attaining and sustaining this justifies the nationalism known as Zionism. These propositions have been fundamental from the beginning. Now, as in the past they are the criterion for distinguishing between a Zionist and a non-Zionist or anti-Zionist. To hold that the Jews are not an ethnic entity—in simple language, a people—is to be a non-Zionist. (E.g. the classic assimilationist opposition to Zionism which argued that Jews are purely adherents of a religious denomination). To hold that Jews do **not** have a need for national self-determination or to hold that even if they might have a need, they do **not** have moral entitlement to realize it, is to be a non-Zionist. To actively oppose Zionism, is to be an anti-Zionist. (This is the analytical distinction that historians like myself make).

The issues here are not absolutely clear cut. Each side has an arguable case. It is debatable today much as it was between Zionists and their opponents in earlier times. The first level of debate revolves around the propositions I have posited. But if you opt for the Zionist cause, decide for being a Zionist, then the next level of debate is about hyper-nationalist fever. It commands one, even against all odds, to oppose and resist all manifestations of hyper-nationalism **from within** the Zionist movement and Israel; to ally oneself with all the forces that are doing so within Israel. And they are still formidable! To do so from without, for example by supporting B.D.S, is no less than to support a strategy of Palestinian hyper-nationalism which negates the postulates of Zionism that I have posited; negates the fundamental right of Israel to exist as the actualization of Jewish national self-determination.

I understand that choosing personal aliya is not as compelling as it was in my time. I wish more Habonim-Dror chaverim in South Africa would make this choice. All olim are welcome, but for reasons that are obvious after all I have said here, I wish there were more from Habonim-Dror than from, say, Bnei-Akiva which encourages settlement in the occupied territories. However, I do believe that present Habonim-Dror **is** espousing a Zionist understanding, against all odds, given that it is situated within a community in which knee-jerk support for hyper-nationalist expressions in Israel holds sway. I do believe that notwithstanding all changes in its size, situation and functioning, it is upholding the fundamentals of Habonim-Dror's heritage. For this, I applaud today's Habonim-Dror.

G. Shimoni
