

## Habonim in the Seventies

*Stephen Pincus, November 2020*

Giddy, Habonim's Homer, has brilliantly captured<sup>1</sup> the classical big issues<sup>2</sup> of our epic: Jewish Identity, Zionism, and Socialism<sup>3</sup>. And he locates each within the geographical contexts of Southern Africa and Israel, and describes the complex interplay of forces along the axis between them. A *classical* account.

So what's missing? It seems to me what's missing is the countercultural dimension. In short, the *romantic* account of Habonim, not only as a Zionist, Jewish, and socially activist movement, but as a quintessential youth movement.

An account of the movement in all its raw, defiant, imaginative, passionate, messy, mystical, subversive, paradoxical, fearless, hopeful, confusing, brash, subtle and irrepressible youthful vitality.

I'd like to suggest that of our epic's nine decades, the turbulent, pivotal, middle one – the 1970s - was our romantic era, which epitomized Habonim's role as a youth movement. The seventies were a culmination of - and a turbulent reaction to - Habonim's classical period, the four decades that came before; and the seventies laid the foundations for the four decades since.

We all know that the counterculture emerged in Europe and North America in the 1960s - Woodstock, Vietnam, the Berkeley riots, SDS, The Black Panthers, The Chicago Seven, Bob Dylan, Danny the Red, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, marijuana and LSD. But like many things, the real impact of the counterculture arrived late in Southern Africa, and was felt in the 1970s.

1970s Habonim was a fertile and perhaps "kosher" setting for exploring its trappings - the music revolution, encounter groups, sexual freedom, drugs, new forms of expression, rejecting materialism, communal living. And relentless questioning.

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<sup>1</sup> NINETY YEARS OF HABONIM-DROR SA: A SHORT HISTORY, by Gideon Shimoni, October 2020

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes labelled pillars or planks, streams or strands, themes or threads, legs or pegs, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Or social conscience, social awareness, social action, or equality and service to humanity, etc.

In those heady days, it was cool to study social sciences and humanities, and madrichim drew on conceptual tools from these fields to enrich their sichot. The atmosphere at our talkshops dripped with ideas that were interesting, illuminating and inspiring.

### **Challenges**

Let's look at five challenges that Habonim faced as the decade unfolded:

#### **1. *Israel***

The decade began with Israel still basking in the euphoria of '67, barely a generation removed from Auschwitz and admired in the West for its creativity and compassion not only in gathering in the exiles but in its outreach efforts - like supporting decolonization in Africa.

Then came the Yom Kippur War, the oil embargo, the OAU's rejection, and in 1975 the UN's declaration that Zionism is Racism. The response to the war – especially the volunteer campaign - energized the movement, but a longer-term disillusionment with Israel had set in.

#### **2. *Labor Zionism***

Habonim entered the seventies identifying with Israel's long dominant Ashkenazi intellectual and political elites.

Much like the comfort that many of us drew from being able to return to our affluent homes even as we riled against our parents' value-systems, we were afforded the luxury of sheltering ideologically and institutionally under the umbrella of Israel's labor Zionist hegemony while asserting our independence as a youth movement. This Habonim did by successfully contesting the Zionist elections as a separate party, allowing subsequent generations to play Federation politics while challenging its fundamental premises.

But in 1977, our labor Zionist umbrella blew away in the storm of the Likud Mapach, revealing deep-rooted ethnic, cultural and economic fault lines which continue to divide Israeli society. We may still have controlled the chair of the Youth Council, but the corridors of power in Jerusalem were suddenly closed to

us. And more important was the realization that our dreams for Israel weren't necessarily shared by others, and the others were calling the shots.

### 3. *Judaism*

Habonim faced two new religious trends during the seventies.

The first – the ascendance of Bnei Akiva in the wake of the burgeoning settlement movement - was less a threat than a positive differentiator. In the words of a seminar song we wrote to the tune *Od Lo Ahavti Dai*:

*“we don't have shtei gadot hayarden,  
we don't have bli yadayim,  
but we do have Habonim”*

But what *was* the Jewish content of that Habonim?

The second trend, the intrusion of *charedi* outreach movements – both Hasidic and Yeshivish – into the “*parev*” traditional South African Jewish community, challenged us to define this and seduced several senior Habonim leaders with the promise of definitive, content-rich responses to the confusion of the times.

### 4. *South Africa*

In June 1976, half a year after we had marched *as Habonim* against the UN resolution, we marched in solidarity with Soweto youth. This time there was no Habonim banner, but there *were* arrests of Habonim leaders, some of whom were ironically mobilized by the army to suppress the protests in Soweto!

After Soweto and Steve Biko's assassination in 1977, the classic response that “our focus on aliyah insulated us from the struggle” seemed less compelling. This created tensions within and departures from the movement.

## 5. *Leadership*

Habonim entered the seventies with a unique depth of collective leadership, built around successive Machon cohorts with deep bonds and lots of creative energy. By mid-decade, the government's refusal to grant army deferrals effectively killed the Machon. Combined with a less attractive Israel, competing Jewish and South African narratives, and increased emigration post-Soweto, this eroded Habonim's leadership base.

As we watched the Rhodesian community unravel, we expected the South African movement to follow its northern sibling, run by high school students with increasing reliance on shlichim.

And so, as in most romantic periods, a pessimistic malaise set in - a despair reflected, during 1978, in a movement without a full time Mazkir Klali and a Machaneh of around 800 - the lowest attendance in many years.

## *Responses*

How did we respond to these challenges?

There was increased reliance on individual leaders and on highly talented and committed shlichim – and we used our political leverage in the Zionist Federation to get more of them. We tried to revive the Machon with the help of the Israeli embassy (who ironically were advising the SADF on how to prevent draft evasion) but that fell through and instead we introduced a variety of group programs in Israel and South Africa.

One day one of those groups returned with an amazing opportunity. Rather than following our forebears to the established movement kibbutzim, why not start a brand new kibbutz on a barren windswept cliff in the western Galil? Mud, rocks, open kupah. Almost everyone under age 25.

A bold romantic response to the malaise. As Giddy points out, it was the last project of its kind, and few movement members remained.<sup>4</sup> But Tuval captured the movement's imagination.

As Habonim approached its Golden Jubilee in 1980, it had a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Thousands gathered for a breathtaking series of Jubilee celebrations around the country. *Machaneh Hayovel* completed the decade with 1300 participants – which is believed to be largest camp in Habonim's 90 year history.

Further, 1970s Habonim spawned its own countercultures, with a generally creative tension between more traditional and radical sensibilities through the decade – 'verkrampt' and 'feely feely', Joburg and Cape Town, 'Group of 10' and 'Garin Maor', and so on.

In the ongoing balancing-act between ideology and inclusion that is at the heart of the Habonim ethos, I believe we stressed tolerance over certainty. The Habonim of the seventies was ultimately a "*klali*" movement. And while some wonderful chevre came and went, and some anarchy was loosed upon the world, the centre held, and things didn't fall apart.

### **Outcomes**

So what is the legacy of the seventies?

By the end of the decade, Thatcher and Reagan were elected, and our world was on a rightwards trajectory that still hasn't fundamentally reversed course. Economics and engineering were eclipsing the softer social sciences and humanities, with values, ideas and idealism being replaced by valuations, acquisitions and cynicism.

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<sup>4</sup> NINETY YEARS OF HABONIM-DROR SA: A SHORT HISTORY, by Gideon Shimoni, October 2020, page 13.

But many of the movement's concerns over the past four decades are rooted in the seventies: peace, equality, human rights and social justice, collective action, environmentalism, sexual freedom, feminism and gender diversity.

It's easy to forget, at a time when youth is closely associated with *technology*, that the youth counterculture was at its core a protest against *technocracy*.

In drawing on the best elements of that counterculture, 1970s Habonim developed in its chevre

- a sensitivity to the other,
- an appreciation for nuance,
- and a multi-dimensionality

that are antidotes to the dumbed-down, one-dimensional world of screens and memes that we currently inhabit.

A role that should always be integral to Habonim as a romantic youth movement.