

REFLECTIONS ON THE SIXTIES — THE MOVEMENT THAT WAS NOT

1985

An attempt to focus on a specific period of the fifty-year history of Habonim must base itself on the writer's understanding of the general outline of that history. This writer's understanding of the chapters would be:

1. The events leading up to the establishment of Habonim.
2. The formative period — up to World War II.
3. Habonim in wartime.
4. Postwar: from the Struggle for the State up to the Aliya of Garin Aleph and Beth (1945-1952).
5. Retrenchment and Educational Re-orientation (Habonim Workshop)— from the mid Fifties to the late Sixties.
6. From the Seventies.

RETRENCHMENT AND EDUCATIONAL RE-ORIENTATION

The period to be discussed here spans roughly fifteen years, from the early Fifties to the late Sixties. The salient events which ushered the period in were the "mass" Aliya of veteran leadership that had constituted the Movement leadership up to the early Fifties, the establishment of Geshar-Haziv and Urim and the institution of the Habonim Workshop. The end of Murray Weingarten's (Moshe Kerem) first shlichut and the Aliya of Danny Kerman (Carmon) Mazkir, (1953) constituted a final break in a continuity of overlapping personal histories going back to Habonim's formative period in the late Nineteen Thirties. The turmoil among American Youth from the mid-Sixties (Viet Nam), the Six Day War, the end of movement directed Garinim (settlement groups) to Geshar Haziv and Urim⁽¹⁹⁷³⁾, the Yom Kippur War and the decision that American Habonim would re-establish Kibbutz Gezer constitute a sequence of events which, over a period of years, bring us to another stage in the development of Habonim.

From the mid-Sixties we also witness the first attempts within the Zionist and Israeli establishment to create options for contact with American Jewish Youth independent of the classical chalutzic Youth Movements. The idea of "Tochnit America" — the mobilization of funds on a larger scale from the Israeli Government — was presented to Levi Eshkol's government by Moshe Kerem and Mikey Duvdvani who served as schlichim to Habonim in the mid-Sixties. This development set the stage for Mordecai Bar-On's * innovation of Community

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shlichim (as distinct from Movement shlichim). It also resulted indirectly in the establishment of the Kibbutz Aliya Desk system -- an implicit admission that the classical Zionist Youth Movements could no longer serve as an exclusive conduit from the Diaspora to the Kibbutz Movement. Zvika Zexer, of Ashdot Yaakov-Ichud, became the first Kibbutz Aliya Desk shaliach in 1966.

THE MOVEMENT THAT WAS NOT

An honest perspective on the period under discussion must take into consideration not only central events but also what did NOT happen. On the one hand, Habonim did not disappear as a result of the establishment of the State. However, for the last 35 years, Habonim, the largest of the classical Zionist Youth Movements, has been a marginal phenomenon on the American Jewish scene. Its numbers have never surpassed 2000-2500 and most of these have been children under the age of 14.

A further cause for contemplation and reflection is that in spite of the tremendous human and Zionist potential which has been active in Habonim over a period of two generations and in spite of the INDIVIDUAL contributions of former Habonim members in the American Jewish Community and for Israel, Habonim as a Movement has had no MAJOR impact either in America or in Israel.

This statement is not meant to deny the positive Zionist and Jewish impact that Habonim has had on the lives of those hundreds--perhaps a few thousand who passed through it during the period under discussion. But our focus is on Habonim as a Movement and its Movement impact.

There do seem to have been two processes which Habonim can justifiably be said to have played at least a modest role.

In America, the period of the Fifties and the Sixties witnessed the emergence of the Jewish Camping Movement as a major factor in informal Jewish Education. There is no doubt that Habonim pioneered this path and many of the Habonim graduates (Graenum Berger) were instrumental in this development. Within Habonim itself -- Camp Kvutza became, more and more, the central educational tool up to Workshop Age.

In Israel -- the Habonim Kibbutzim -- particularly the American Habonim Kibbutzim became catalysts in integrating family sleeping within collective education.

However, from the perspective of the mid- Eighties, the modesty of Habonim's accomplishments as measured by the impact of the Habonim graduates of the Fifties and Sixties, whether in America or in Israel, warrant further contemplation. After all, even the limited impact mentioned above must be credited to the pre-State movement generation.

WHY DID HABONIM FAIL AS A MOVEMENT?

After the Holocaust, only the North American Jewish Community could potentially have generated an ideologically autonomous Zionis Youth Movement. Certainly, Habonim constituted the logical focus for such a development. It did not happen.

Without doubt, we can adduce an array of general factors. The intellectual and social climate of the Fifties was unfavorable (remember McCarthy, remember the characterizations of the upper middle class of the period — C. Wright Mills' "White Collar", William Whytes' "Organization Man" and, above all, Riesman's archetype of the other directed man in "The Lonely Crowd").

It would have required an unusually mature, perceptive and committed leadership to generate movement under such circumstances. But in the period 1947-1952, the entire indigenou leadership of Habonim made Aliya. Its legacy was basically personal self-fulfillment, (Hagshama atzmit). Habonim graduates were swallowed up into the struggle for the State and the initial period of building and settling new kibbutzim. Their message to those they left behind coul only be: "Do our thing - follow our path. In your non-conformism to surrounding society, do conform to what we have done and are doing. "

In the absence of compelling historical circumstances, this resulted in a "wavelet" of Aliya and small groups of Chalutzim to Geshet Haziv and Urim. The ideology of "continuity" resulted in the rejection of creative leadership. The other-directed world of burgeoning careerism so readily available to the relatively small Depression and post-Depression born generation in the rapidly developing American society of the Fifties and early Sixties readily absorbed the Youth Movement drop-out. Thus Habonim, never very large, alway marginal, dropped from some 3500 members in 1948 to half that number of members ten years later. The qualitative change was even more serious. With the Aliya of the entire veteran leadership after the establishment of the State, the Habonim Movement became a marginal childrens' organization.

Perhaps the roots of Habonim's ideological malaise strike even deeper. Other factors probably play a role.

Firstly, from its inception, American Habonim was an ideological satellite of World Labor Zionist Mapai hegemony with no real tradition of Zionist ideological innovation. Secondly, American pragmatism and liberalism have traditionally been averse to dogma and doctrines. Habonim prided itself in being an "American" chalutzic Youth Movement. Unfortunately, this tended to de-legitimize ideology altogether—especially in a period (1945-1950)

of overwhelming political events demanding action. General American educational philosophy also provided the rationale for de-emphasizing ideology. Habonim came to see itself as educating a certain "personality-type" who would confront the challenges of Zionism and grapple with them according to values inculcated by Habonim. The problems latent in this marriage of American pragmatism with Israeli Labor Zionism became manifest when the particular historical circumstances changed and when young adult role models disappeared after 1950.

Politically, the ineptness of Habonim graduates in Israel is part of the larger problem of "Anglo-Saxon" integration in Israeli public life. Of course, *in theory* it should have been the task of Habonim to equip its graduates to overcome this problem.

THE EFFECT OF THE HABONIM WORKSHOP

The establishment of the Habonim Workshop in 1951 created what was to become the "peak experience" of the Habonim educational and socialization processes.

The Leadership Institutes of the late Forties were supplanted by a program for which almost every Habonim member would be eligible. From the late Fifties Habonim leadership was based on Workshop Graduates. From 1959 all the MAZKIRIM of Habonim and most members of the MAZKIRUT and MERAKZIM were Workshop graduates and almost all made Aliya. Most of the MAZKIRIM ^{of the Sixties} are members of the Habonim Kibbutzim — Geshar Haziv, ^{of Urim}, *Unquestionably the Aliya of Garin Daled to Urim (1964), Garin Hei & Egar to Geshar Haziv (1965-1969) & Garin Maaly to Urim (1969/70)*

On the other hand, the Habonim Workshop came to cap a process by which Habonim became an even more in-grown movement than previously. Habonim became largely non-viable socially for older adolescents who had not been through the movement socialization of Camps, Machaneh Bonim and finally, Workshop. As social factors and socialization process became more prominent in determining Habonim membership, ideology became increasingly secondary.

Habonim became a passively Israeli-oriented childrens' organization mainly social in terms of the significance to the participants and with a marked tendency to the formation of closed adolescent cliques with little motivation for outreach. The "Youth Movement" no longer served as the social psychological medium by which the unformed value world, the "ego identity" of the adolescent could be transformed by means of peer group and suitable role models into a young adult chaltzic commitment (whatever the practical implications and applications). Rather, "Zionist Youth Movement process" could now be described as "I happened to grow up in a group that happened to grow up in Habonim". This was (and is) hardly an adequate ideological rationale nor did it contain potential for future initiative and innovation.

Maaly to Urim (1969/70) had a decisive impact on these Kibbutzim.

There are other reasons why The Habonim Youth Workshop failed to generate movement. Educationally it was abandoned by the Movement and left to the hosting Kibbutzim. Of course, in the period under discussion, (Fifties and early Sixties) a Habonim bereft of leadership had little choice.

THE PROBLEMS OF INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP AND SHLICHIM

Up to the period of Mass Aliya after the establishment of the State, "joining" Habonim at a young age was the first stage in an active educational process through which one increasingly identified with certain ideals by identifying with older indigenous American leadership bound for HAGSHAMA ATZMIT. In the absence of indigenous leadership, a process was initiated by the Zionist establishment whereby the vacuum in Zionist youth leadership began to be filled by Israeli shlichim. The finances which the Zionist establishment should have made available for the development of indigenous leadership became irrevocably committed through the process of organizational inertia, to the maintenance of every local movement branch by means of shlichim.

The late Nineteen Fifties and early Sixties were characterized by the substitution of a massive mishlachot for indigenous leadership. At one time, 1961, some 17 shlichim worked in a movement that scarcely numbered 2000. In this way, hundreds of thousands of dollars were committed to a policy whereby role models from within the movement could not develop even if the motivation would have been present. The Israeli shlichim, working in "kinim" with as few as fifty & never ^{more than} two hundred children were quite unsuitable as role models for older American adolescents. Many scarcely spoke English. The average shaliach was well-motivated and sincere but not relevant to an American Zionist Youth Movement. Nor was this process ameliorated by those shlichim who came from Habonim. By the late Fifties and early Sixties they inevitably became identified with the specific interests of existing Habonim Kibbutzim. Their perspective was "hanging on" rather than building.

Indeed, serious attempts to raise other perspectives, in particular questioning the wisdom of flooding Habonim with shlichim (see below), were perceived as threats to the movement's Israeli establishment and rejected out of hand. As a result, the development of indigenous leadership and indigenous ideology was blocked. The movement, ideologically, simply absorbed Ben Gurion's "statist" ideology because the Israeli shlichim were incapable of projecting a comprehensive alternative Zionist ideology. Why should a random group of Kibbutz shlichim with a total turnover every two years be expected to do better than the Kibbutz Movement itself? Until the mid-Sixties the mishlachot saw itself as primarily responsible for recruiting Garinim to Gesher Haziv and Urim.

Much of their focus was on the individual and his/her personal development. In and of itself this was not negative but in the absence of any ideological engagement the shaliach became de facto just another youth worker rather than the symbol of a movement and an idea as had been the case in the Thirties and the Forties.

Towards the end of the Sixties when some Maapilim did venture "left-wing" ideological stands there were serious reservations amongst shlichim and other members of the Merkaz. But in any case, during the period under discussion there was no attempt to formulate innovative ideas for realization in Israel — with the lone exception of Garin Shaal to a Development Town (Carmiel) see p. 7.

The shlichim thus became (in most cases unknowingly) a factor preventing the emergence of a group of indigenous youth leaders who might embody the ideals and idea (ideology) of the movement. They constituted a financial burden which made it impossible to consider creating an organizational and financial base to enable indigenous leadership to function. The complex reality of the Zionist Bureaucracy militated for a large mishlachat in order to utilize maximally party-key quotas.

ATTEMPTS AT CHANGE

One attempt to break out of the negative dynamics of becoming non-movement focused around the attempt of this writer (1961-1962). Habonim had become trapped in a cycle of organizational activity to ensure its continued day to existence without really doing anything of movement significance. The suggested program of radical reform was based on :

1. A drastic reduction of the number of shlichim in order to force the involvement of an indigenous older leadership which would constitute relevant role models for Bonim and younger Maapilim.
2. Creating political and organizational independence from the Israeli (Kibbutz) establishment.
3. Outreach and impact: Habonim based on ideology rather than adolescent cliques. Habonim with an identifiable impact on Israeli polity as a result of its Aliya.

It was unclear at the time if a real basis of committed members existed within Habonim to realize such a revolution. Hence the unprecedented decision on my part to stand for election as Mazkir at the Toronto Veida (June 1962) as an alternative to the Mazkirut's candidate, Aaron Shoirif (Sharif).

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When it became clear during the course of the Veida that the basis for radical reform did not exist in Habonim, I withdrew. There was hardly any point in dividing a childrens' organization on an issue of personality. Most of the shlichim felt threatened by the suggested reforms and most of the older members of Habonim were unable to separate questions of principle from questions of personal loyalty. Anything less than a large majority for reform would have been ineffective. After another half year of partial activity on the Merkaz during which time the series of articles in Furrows on the nature of the Zionist Youth Movement⁽⁸⁾ was written, I saw no further objective movement reason for delaying my Aliya. The experiences of the Mazkiruiot of the mid-Sixties seemed to show, in retrospect, that attempts at change would not have succeeded.

From the mid-Sixties, the Mazkiruiot and shlichim were far more aware of the necessity of reform. But they proved unable to break out of the self-perpetuating negative dynamics into which Habonim evolved and must confront to this day. In the late Sixties — 1965-1969 — in particular, a strong group of Maapilim emerged, graduates of the Eleventh to Fifteenth Workshop who identified to a degree with the ideas for reform that had been mooted five years earlier (above). But, in spite of initial steps (such as the formation of Batei Garin) to establish a base for indigeneous leadership, Habonim in the late Sixties did not succeed in mobilizing consistently a group of 10-20 Maapilim prepared to integrate their personal plans while in America with movement needs. A break in the continuity of the older leadership occurred with the Aliya of Garin-*Maach*----- to Urim (1969/70) following immediately after the Aliya of Garin Etgar to Gesher Haziv (1969).

Ultimately, we may conclude that the Sixties generation made Aliya in significant numbers but did not have a lasting influence on Habonim-- neither during the period within which they were active nor as graduates in the 15 years following.

The Aliya generated by the Habonim of the mid-Sixties became a central factor in Gesher Haziv and Urim. But in a movement sense this Aliya was passive and non-innovative, reflecting the education to passive continuity which it received *via the socialization process of Camps-Machaneh Borim - Workshop - post Workshop Maapilim Bir-groups.*

GARIN SHAAL

It is against this backdrop that we must also view the failure of Garin Shaal— the first serious attempt to create a Garin to a Development Town —Carmiel— in the late Sixties. The Garin disintegrated after three years *in spite of the fact that it had full support of Ichud Habonim.*

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⁽⁸⁾ published in part in 1965 by Habonim under the title of "The Impact of Zionist Youth"

Alternative ideology had not found soil for growth in Habonim. Hence, the motivation for many of those who opted for Garin Shaal was "we don't want Kibbutz". Such motivation did not provide the positive ideological base and determination to pioneer a new concept even though it had Movement support.

Graduates of Habonim that did not make Aliya remained, by and large, Zionist supporters and even activists. But here too, in terms of numbers and innovative influence, this was to be irrelevant in terms of the total Zionist Scene.

The change in the social and intellectual climate in the late Sixties and in particular after the Six Days War, including that of the American Jewish Community, brought forth a generation in the Zionist Youth Movement which could still play a role in evolving an action-oriented movement instead of remaining childrens' organizations concerned with the day-to-day problems of organizational continuity and existence. But so far, the inertia of the Zionist bureaucracy's commitment to maintaining shlichim instead of investing in the indigenous leadership of the movement was and remains too great.

"Ben Chamishim La-eytzah" said our sages. At Fifty, Habonim has reached to age of counsel. Has the time come for "cheshbon nefesh"? Will Habonim have the strength and maturity to take counsel and rethink a creative role for itself in the coming generation?

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