

# The Generation of Jacob on the Kibbutz

By Michael Livni (Langer)

**C**HILDREN RAISED IN THE KIBBUTZ internalize both its principles and perplexities. There is no vacuum in the processes of socialization and acculturation. From teenage, boys and girls are exposed more and more to the world beyond the kibbutz perimeter. Their ability — moreso, their desire — to grapple with the problems resulting from the interfacing of kibbutz with contemporary Israeli society (as individuals or as part of a movement) depends on the degree and quality of their identification and sense of obligation towards the contents and lifestyle of the kibbutz framework.

We are living through a time of ideological uncertainty in the Kibbutz Movement. Many kibbutz educators in particular are perplexed and demoralized by the end results of the educational process (or the absence thereof) as reflected in the behaviour of the younger kibbutz generation — those who reached maturity from the 1970s. One gets the impression that, after completing 12 years in the educational system, we at best return to square one. At worst the phenomena of truancy, minor delinquency, alcoholism and drugs beset a significant minority. Two recent cases of gang rape involving kibbutz youth shocked the Movement and made national headlines. The educational investment of 12 years appears not to have left a significant enough residue. On the Movement level both the United Kibbutz Movement and the Kibbutz Haartzi have attempted to confront these questions during the past 10 years — without much success.

## The Collapse of Zionist Education

It seems to me that the roots of the educational problem lie in the collapse of Zionist education in the classical sense. In the past a Zionist educational process meant that an individual came to see personal destiny and personal self-realization inexorably linked to the physical and spiritual redemption of the Jewish People in its land. From the standpoint of the Labor Zionist pioneering tradition this meant seeing yourself, your people and the world through the lens of one who would mend Society, in particular Jewish Society (Tikun Olam) in the prophetic spirit. It is this sense of mission that has not been imbued in the current generation of kibbutz youth and young adults — even among those (today less than 50 percent) who choose to remain on the kibbutz.

Only the founding generation, in the main the young pioneers of the Second and Third Aliyot (1905-1925), consciously chose a path for itself — heard the call — and “went forth” as did Abraham when he committed himself to the command to “go forth out of your land, from the land where you were born, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.” Hanna Senesh’s poem reflects this spirit:

**A voice called and I went  
I went because the voice called  
I went so that I should not fall.**

From the standpoint of its mental makeup, the founding generation was incapable of acting in a manner other than that of fulfilling the voice’s command, even if it meant travelling a lonely and difficult road, as the poem’s following lines hint:

**But at the crossroads  
I stuffed my ears with the cold whiteness  
And I cried  
For I had lost something.**

The strongest expression of this determination, awareness of and identification with a sense of mission is that of Shlonski, the poet of the Second Aliya, who sees himself as standing “. . . at the crossroads of generations between night (exile) and dawn (redemption); we dared to create from the Beginning, for we came to continue the way” (of Jewish history).

The early Aliyot were a highly selective process. Only a small minority of those who made aliya in those years stayed. But it was this minority (which included David Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol, Itzhak Ben-Zvi, Golda Meir and Zalman Shazar) that put its stamp on the nascent Jewish State.

The founding generation, we may call it the generation of Abraham, educated the generation of Isaac to be loyal to the end. The generation that came to maturity before and during the War of Independence came to be known as “Dor Itzhak” because much of the cream of this generation was sacrificed in the struggle for the State. Within the Kibbutz Movement the Generation of Isaac underwent a crisis in the 1950’s. Many felt that the *shlichut* (mission) of the kibbutz was at an end. The time had come to serve the State, in the armed forces, in the Civil Service and in pioneering economic enterprises. But the Isaac Generation was a generation that nevertheless internalized the concept of *shlichut*. This was (and is) the generation of Moshe Dayan, Yigal Alon and Yitzhak Rabin. The founding

generation supplied the inspiration and ideology necessary to establish the State, but the generation of “Isaac” carried out the practical work. Even if it eventually showed some cracks in its ideology, this generation was there to serve in the critical hours of Zionist need. They did so in the spiritual shadow of the founding generation.

Like Isaac, the only Patriarch who did not leave the country, this generation was rooted in the Land of Israel. Like the Isaac of Biblical tradition, “Dor Itzhak” could not match the founding generation in terms of ideological and spiritual depth. Indeed, many of this generation saw themselves as men and women of action, and were somewhat contemptuous of ideology as such.

## The Educational Inheritance of Dor Yaakov

The relative lack of depth of the Isaac Generation revealed itself when it had to educate the next generation, Dor Yaakov, the generation of Jacob. This generation is one of transition, a generation that matured from the 1970s. It grew up in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, which punctured the myth of Israeli infallibility and invincibility that had reached its apogee as a result of the Six Day War in 1967. This same period marked the ascendancy of the right-wing Likud Party. Within the Kibbutz Movement the educators of the Isaac Generation were simply incapable of relating to the sea changes in Israeli society. The third generation (the generation of Jacob) was set adrift without a map. The Kibbutz in particular became totally exposed to normative Western values via television and through the innocent influence that large numbers of volunteers — Jewish, and increasingly non-Jewish — had on Kibbutz youth culture. Just as the patriarch Jacob had to grapple with his identity against the background of a multitude of uncertainties, so must the Jacob Generation of the Kibbutz grapple with its identity, with the purpose

of life, of being Israeli, of being a kibbutz member. The alternative proposition has increasingly become that perhaps life has no purpose and one might as well live the “good” life in Los Angeles.

Jacob struggled with the angel to achieve a new identity — that of Israel. But the Kibbutz generation of today is scarcely motivated to even undertake such a struggle in order to crystallize its unique Jewish-Israeli-Zionist identity. The readiness to wrestle with “God and man” (and with yourself) is a psychological *sine qua non* for voluntarily taking on that Zionist sense of mission and obligation which many on the kibbutz have lost.

From the educational standpoint the pioneering Abraham Generation acquired their creative and revolutionary foundations in their teens and twenties. The Jewish identity of these chalutzim was never in question. They had previously imbibed a commitment to and identification with Jewish destiny. In this sense, it was simpler for Isaac’s Generation, for a situation of do or die was forced upon it within the context of relatively limited horizons. Jacob’s Generation, on the other hand, must grapple with meaning and identity against the backdrop of multiple alternatives. Many have simply opted out. In an infinite number of open and hidden ways the messages of life in the here and now, as distinct from a personal link to national destiny, are in the ascendant. The latter is seen as the prerogative of orthodoxy, Zionist and non-Zionist.

The Generation of Jacob will soon be the predominant element on the kibbutzim even if only a minority of them choose to remain on the kibbutz. Will this generation be capable of bringing forth leadership that can ensure the creative continuity of the kibbutz in the twenty-first century? This is one of a number of open questions relating to the Zionist future of the Jewish State.

JS

Michael Livni (Langer) is a veteran kibbutz member and Educator, originally from Vancouver, Canada. Currently he serves as Director of the Department of Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization.