

FOUR

Mishnah Impossible

ZIONIST ATTEMPTS TO TRANSFORM THE JEWISH PEOPLE

The heroic efforts to transform the Jewish people grew out of the ashes of the First World War, with many young Zionist activists projecting their utopian visions as unquestioned articles of Zionist faith. Even as they denounced as moribund and doomed to extinction the religion of their parents, Zionists could not imagine their collective future without an imperative set of strictures shaping belief and behavior. Anita Shapira saw that Labor Zionism became a potent movement partly because it substituted extraordinary ideological claims for once revered transcendent religious principles. “[T]he Palestinian labor movement was . . . first and foremost a great fraternity of believers—people whose lives were directed by an all-consuming faith.”¹ Jewish teenage boys and girls in Europe caught in the tumultuous forces of war and nationalist uprisings turned their consciousness of being trapped between a repetitive past of repression and a future where hatred of Jews was deeply embedded into a certainty that a strict adherence to the enlightened principles of justice and equality would produce a utopian Jewish homeland.

In World War I, Jews discovered that they inhabited one of the most strategically pivotal regions in Europe. Jewish towns and villages became battlefields for armies marching to engage their enemies, but slaughtering Jews on their way because the latter’s ethnicity and religion marked them as suitable subjects for hatred. Tens of thousands of Jews were murdered by czarist troops; half a million were exiled from their homes, whereas another 100,000 were massacred by anti-Bolshevik forces in the Ukraine during the civil war in Russia between 1917 and 1921.² A vulnerable people, many of whose towns and villages were erased from Europe’s new geography and who appeared withered and dying, found spiritual hope, according to Anita Shapira, in

[t]wo events of crucial significance . . . the Balfour Declaration and the October Revolution in Russia. These events gave rise to messianic expectations among Jewish youth in Russia. . . . There was a feeling in the air that the Jewish people were now going to be compensated for their sufferings and that the dark days of war were about to give birth to the light of national redemption.³

In the aftermath of the carnage, the postwar international context embracing the principle of minority rights and intended as protection for Jews against discrimination actually reinforced the idea of the Jew as outsider and threat. And although the First World War may have functioned in many ways to foster international recognition of Jews as a national minority, it also touched off the problems of development that typically stoked the fires of Jew-hatred—low standard of living, limited investment, and rapid population increase.⁴

This, then, was Zionism's great moment. The fact that hitherto virtually unknown nationalities had risen to dizzying heights of statehood, undreamed of before the war, produced both precedents for the Zionist argument and conditions ripe for attracting large numbers of Jews to Palestine's shores. In the immediate postwar atmosphere and in the wake of the great triumph of the national principle, everything seemed possible. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and the anchoring of Great Britain's Mandate in Palestine in support of a Jewish national home saved the Zionist cause and transformed what had been the improbability of Jewish independence into a distinct possibility. A British commitment to support in Palestine the establishment of a Jewish national home and an Eastern Europe in which Jewish national consciousness and anti-Semitism were both strengthened caused hundreds of thousands of Jews to see a connection between their aspirations and the need for a Jewish state.⁵

But some number of Zionists, driven by necessity to seek a political solution to the problems encountered in an age of nationalism and dictatorship, generated ambitions not simply for a state and society like all other nations but also for redemption, the hope that a Jewish state and society would provide a new kind of social order without hierarchy, without exploitation, and with justice and equality for all.

The images so indelibly inscribed in the conventional histories of Israel's founding tend to confirm the notion that a Jewish nation was remade and a new collective identity formed. In a land with no natural resources

claimed by a movement possessing too little capital for the tasks it undertook, Israel seems to have been established by a collective act of will. The country's founders pushed this notion to the extreme by presenting the agricultural collectives—never encompassing more than a tiny percentage of Palestine's Jewish population—as emblematic of the Jewish national home and of a community presumably forged by faith in a set of shared Zionist commandments: to live in freedom, to work the land, and to revitalize the Hebrew language. Zionists would remake their world with their own hands in accordance with their own moral convictions. Barely able to feed their bodies, these young men and women expected to be sustained by the purity of their vision. Expectations this extreme, one might say, must be doomed from the start.

This chapter will explore attempts to reshape the character and society undertaken in Palestine by Labor Zionist visionaries, with special but not exclusive attention given to *Hashomer Hatzair* as one of the first self-anointed movements that not only imagined a Zionist utopia but also tried to build it. The more *Hashomer Hatzair* members became mired in the poverty and turmoil of the First World War, the more they were convinced of their own power to remake themselves and turn Jewish society in Palestine into a model of justice for the world. Can this be because their wartime experience, with all its terrors, somehow not only suggested to them the techniques needed to determine their own fates but also imparted to them the energy with which to translate their theories into practice?

Highlighting *Hashomer Hatzair* idealists requires some justification because they were, in many ways, exceptional. But although they projected what appeared to be an uncompromising idealism that often ignited furious derision, they also moved well within the orbit of mainstream Zionism in believing in the possibility of historic transformation and in the power of human beings to make themselves felt in fixing its trajectory and in giving it meaning and substance.⁶ Although other Zionist utopian programs enlisted militant action, they, too, were prompted by the same internal convictions that set *Hashomer Hatzair* on its course of action and inspired such rapturous admiration. In the dominant culture of Palestine's Jewish community, *Hashomer Hatzair* idealists came to personify the Zionist vision in its purest form, a standard against which the achievements of the Jewish homeland came to be measured. Other groups as well caught the imagination of Palestine's Jewish community because they, too, projected an image of self-sacrifice, an allure springing from the affirmation of their

idealism despite the dangers. Anita Shapira provides this account of why the hard-core leaders of the *Gedud ha-Avodah* (Labor Battalion) stirred such admiration. “The *Gedud* operated for seven years, never enrolled more than 10% of Palestine’s workers but loomed large in the imagination. It was considered a national tragedy when a segment returned to the USSR and explained their decision to leave as a failure to fulfill their vision.”⁷

For visionaries, such as those affiliated with *Hashomer Hatzair* (and to a lesser extent, with the *Gedud ha-Avodah*), Zionism had to reach beyond the goals of merely defending or strengthening the Jewish nation; it had to embrace the notion of recasting it into a fundamentally new form. Reconfiguring the Zionist imaginary landscape, visionaries—most of whom affiliated with one or another of the Labor Zionist movements—presented breathtakingly ambitious programs and saw the process of implementing them as the central task of their lives.

The term *visionary* also requires clarification. Visionaries were not necessarily conscious of being more remarkable than the larger group of pioneers of which they were a part. In this chapter, I do not adopt the word so widely used in Zionist historiography—*pioneer*—because although all pioneers subscribed to one or another Labor Zionist vision, they did not necessarily devote their lives to implementing it in the same literal fashion as the people I will discuss in this chapter. To be sure, pioneers were at the center of Labor Zionist moral and political discourse about place, society, and national identity well into the era of statehood. But the first thing one notes about the years between 1919 and 1924, when supposedly 14,000 pioneers⁸ entered Palestine, is that there was often great disparity between the situation of pioneers and the ideals they espoused. Not all pioneers remained in Palestine, and many did not engage in manual labor for very long. Many fled to the cities for, as one *kibbutz* leader put it, “culture and privacy.”⁹ For many pioneers, communal life turned out to be a form of suffocation.

Among pioneers there were differences between those for whom principles pressed powerfully on conscience and life and those for whom they did not. When ideals clashed with economic and political conditions, visionaries showed heightened loyalty to the former, whereas most pioneers accommodated the latter.

Nation-building projects as ambitious as those embraced by the visionaries discussed in this chapter arose out of the deluge of a European war that generated both massive social disruptions and intensive and heated debates over the nature and condition of the Jewish people. The war caused

suffering, but it also triggered an intellectual dynamic that radically revised how Jews understood themselves and how they imagined their future. Although the war did not produce a single definition of Jewish identity or a consensus on the direction of future cultural development, it did seem to “threaten the physical and cultural existence of the Jewish people and turn once vibrant societies into graveyards.”¹⁰ The focused brutalities of war convinced these young Zionists to subject all inherited ways of thinking about society to moral judgment. A war that seemed endless had to be a step toward creating social arrangements that would change not only how humans thought about themselves but also how they interacted with one another. The turmoil and violence that triggered the breakdown of institutions and values spurred on Jewish youth, once well placed in the middle class, to raise deep philosophical questions about how people ought to live. Wartime chaos also gave them the ability to see their lives partly in universal terms and imagine that the Jewish homeland would serve as a model of harmony, bestowing benefits on the entire world.

In this chapter, I will trace how redeeming land and person acquired almost talismanic power for such visionaries in the early years of the British Mandate and how it became the focus of their unprecedented aspirations. I will describe what happened to these visionaries when their efforts collapsed. If we are to fathom how such utopian visions could become unquestioned articles of faith, we have to examine how the brutality of a war that engulfed so many Jews also convinced many of them to see the Jewish national home as a place of freedom where they could build a society founded on the principles they were developing for a new social order.

THE WAR

The effects of the First World War in Poland, Russia, and, in particular, in regions of the Ukraine and Galicia, disrupted the lives of all Jews, who were often perceived as the enemy by all sides. Caught in a war they could not stop, Jews were also ritually sacrificed by nationalist forces in popular uprisings they could neither join nor combat. Some young men and women maturing during these years found in Zionism both the psychological and economic support systems necessary to withstand the dangers of war as well as the assaults on their claims to a European cultural heritage. Small groups of teenagers, many now thrown out of their schools and on to the streets to sustain their household needs, organized Zionist

cells to study Hebrew, to provide aid to one another, and above all, to analyze what they perceived as the decline of Europe into chaos and nihilism. Of the early years of *Hashomer Hatzair* in Europe, David Horowitz, in his memoirs, estimated that about 100 boys and girls belonged to the Vienna branch, which was divided into cells of seven to fifteen members, sometimes along gender lines.¹¹ There were larger *Hashomer Hatzair* branches throughout Poland and the Ukraine.¹² The shock of the war drove many from the villages and small towns, which quickly became battlefields conquered and lost by imperial armies, into the shelter of cities like Vienna, where they joined the refugees walking the streets in search of food and shelter. Jews always had a sense of their own distinctiveness, albeit believing it to be diminishing with the onset of modernity; now they had a mounting consciousness that, against all expectations, their vulnerabilities might be increasing. “[T]he young people who came to *Eretz Yisrael* . . . were mainly aged from 18–22, forged by the experiences of the war years in Russia, which had separated them from their families, uprooted them from their homes, and interrupted their studies.”¹³

In the midst of a war in lands where the inhabitants could not insulate themselves from the turmoil and bloodshed that lasted far longer than anticipated, Jews banded together hoping to bring lost humanistic values back to life. Some groups took their name—*Hashomer Hatzair*—from the young guardsmen defending Jewish agricultural communities in Palestine—the *Shomer* organization—hoping to nourish in themselves the qualities possessed by Palestine’s self-proclaimed first generation of Jewish soldiers: physical strength, courage, idealism, altruism, and a spirit of adventure. Believing that revitalizing the Jewish people could be a medium for spreading justice throughout the world, *Hashomer Hatzair* called on its members to commit to the following principles: to live in the land of Israel where Jewish national history was launched, to engage in physical labor, and to communicate only in Hebrew.¹⁴

An emphasis on both the land and personal courage appealed to the spirit of youth, while the exigencies of war gathered together an impressive array of talents. Proving his mettle in Vienna during his years as a refugee, David Horowitz attracted attention as an enterprising and intellectually gifted young man. He later wrote of the extraordinary people giving his *Hashomer Hatzair* youth movement what he called “its most exacting vision.” Some, like Shalom Spiegel, grew up to be famous professors; others became known for their political leadership in European communist parties. Still others, like Sam Spiegel, the Hollywood producer

of *The African Queen* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, were drawn to the arts. David Horowitz, once a Marxist, later a noted economist, eventually became the first director of Israel's national bank.¹⁵

The war inverted traditional family relationships, with children often better able than their parents to find work and negotiate the disorderly street life of refugee-filled cities. Teenagers bumped into one another on the streets where they hawked newspapers or sold goods, and many discovered they shared the same interests. Some found themselves in the company of aspiring poets and writers able to take their learning and inspirations from their descriptions of future possibilities. *Hashomer Hatzair* activities compensated for the educational deprivations of teenagers expelled from their schools and for their commonly felt profound sense of loss and alienation.

The flow of refugees generated the expectation that a shared politics and vision depended as much on culture as on geography. Children filled in the economic gaps left by parents killed by war or caught, in one way or another, by its rampages and unable to cope with its chaos. With families impoverished and dysfunctional, children seemed to become, as if by some uncanny swing of the historical pendulum, ever more powerful and ever more certain of their capacity for changing the course of Jewish history. Youth symbolized a refusal to identify with conventions and suggested an unlimited capacity for rebellion against constricting traditional customs. Defining *Hashomer Hatzair's* radical agenda as much against mainstream Zionist goals as against conventional bourgeois morality, David Horowitz wrote that, "for youth, the accession to power can only be through confrontation."¹⁶ Freeing the young from the disciplines of religion, Labor Zionism was also a catalyst for a morality that could transgress the ethical imperatives acknowledged over centuries. In Avigdor Me'iri's poem "Two Letters," a member of *Gedud ha-Avodah* expresses both his determination to remain in the land of Israel despite the hardships of unemployment and starvation and his unwillingness to succumb to the appeals of his sick mother in Europe to return home to care for her. Redeeming the land and the Jewish people, Me'iri implies, takes precedence over discharging parental duties.¹⁷

The violence and disorder in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War intruding into the villages and towns where Jews lived and forcing large numbers to take to the roads tested the power of both family and state. The war compelled many young Jews not only to reassess the nature of their national belonging but also to rethink how to build a

solid wall of sentiment. The war detached young men and women from family and traditions. Many chose to mold their ties around their peers who had already successfully adjusted to new and difficult circumstances.¹⁸ Neither their parents' example nor that of their community could guide them through the upheavals they encountered. Their mothers and fathers were immured in the past. The attachment to friends weakened traditional loyalties, but it held out the promise of creating new ideas and a fresh political will.

The occasionally wistful memories of David Horowitz suggest that many in the Vienna cells were drawn to the movement primarily for its intensely intellectual atmosphere.¹⁹ Pooling resources to obtain food, these teenagers quickly connected to one another through discussions of history, politics, and literature, thereby transforming their conceptions of their shared past and their understanding of their future options.

Other testimonies are imprinted with allusions to the emotional bonds among members seeking consolation for their loss of faith and confidence in the possibility of restoring vitality to Jewish life even after the guns were silenced. At a time when factories and massive buildings were changing the landscapes of all cities, these teenagers, following the German youth movement model, infused nature with a national cultural and moral mission.²⁰ Enjoyment of nature soon led to an intense interest in human interactions and in the elements required for the establishment of a just society. The budding visionaries found in nature a simplicity and harmony lacking in their own societies, a place for adventure and the release of enormous energy, and also a metaphor for the organic community they dreamed of creating. Indeed, the step from nature to justice was a logical one in the circumstances of war and was made indispensable by the experiences these teenagers brought to their reading of the works of Marx and Freud, the foremost investigators of history and of thoughts and feelings.²¹

Jews suffered the full measure of persecution with the defeat of Europe's multicultural empires and the rise of small nation-states. The Balfour Declaration seemed to make sense out of what was happening in an increasingly senseless Europe by beckoning Jews all over Europe to make their way to Palestine. The menace of violence in the aftermath of war kept the land of Israel a point of reference for Jews hoping to build a society that would reflect values of universal significance in a place where they expected to feel totally at home.

During the first years of British rule in Palestine, Jaffa's port and Tel Aviv's streets were teeming with young men and women who embraced

their arrival as “homecoming,” convinced they would be able to redeem both body and soul from a history bathed in bloodshed, degradation, and deep feelings of inferiority. At first, their passions came fully alive. They sang and walked from the port of Jaffa to Tel Aviv “as if in a dream.” At that exhilarating moment, one visionary wrote, “I felt as if I should stand to say Kaddish since after all that has happened, I feel as if I am starting anew.”²² These visionaries expected their lives to pivot around the moment their feet touched the ground in Palestine when they believed, at least during those moments, that they had been reborn. But a tension soon emerged between their extraordinary transcendental ideological beliefs and their inability to live up to them.

Thus soon after wandering across the land they designated as home, many of these idealists were shocked not simply by what they saw and heard but also by how much of what they encountered seemed alien. Seeking social and political purity, they had to decipher and negotiate a bewildering territory sounding with a Babel of voices and interests. For all their intentions and desires to identify with the land, these idealists were assaulted by a harsh climate, underdevelopment, unfamiliar sounds, smells, and food, and a physical labor that they experienced as intolerable rather than as liberating.²³

It was one thing to declaim on the distortions of the Jewish character in the Diaspora. It was quite another thing to do something about it. In the early years of British rule in Palestine, in an underdeveloped country with limited capital resources, the task came to seem steadily more daunting as Palestine proved initially a site of more danger than opportunity. Young Zionist visionaries arrived armed with dreams of being able to turn the land of Israel into a paradise where physical labor would bring happiness, prosperity, and justice to all. But Labor Zionism’s promises seemed illusory amid the hardships many found difficult to endure and the inevitable feelings of displacement too powerful to acknowledge without casting doubt on the authorizing power of their ideological vision.

Labor Zionism’s vision thus sometimes filled an emotional void for Jews suffering from displacement and feelings of alienation. This vision—with its songs, poems, and dances—enveloped them with its comforting idealistic message of justice and its soothing narrative of ultimate success in the face of what seemed at best an uncertain future. Many could not concede that coming to the land of Israel uprooted them; an idealistic vision could thus help some feel more at ease in Zion.

The young people making their way to Palestine in these early years ignored warnings from the Zionist movement that such a journey was

dangerous, that they could not enter Constantinople legally, and that there were few jobs available in a country still so heavily damaged by war. When the *Eretz Israel* Committee in Odessa in 1919 sent a telegram to the Zionist Commission in Palestine notifying it that the British Consul intended to issue 180 visas to refugees from Palestine to return to their country, it received this reply: “Shortage of apartments, enormous shortage of work and no opportunities likely to open up in near future. Don’t force refugees to return but they have to be able to take care of themselves.”²⁴

Despite the hardships, young men and women came, mostly high school graduates, including some trained for agricultural work through the *he-Halutz* movement.²⁵ Most believed the land of Israel would be the antidote to their despair and their passage to redemption. Many came from parts of Russia fragmented by revolutionary battles; others left Poland and parts of Galicia, where borders were fluid, national identities were unclear, and chaos allowed travelers to pass across yet unformed countries without official documents.²⁶ During these first postwar months, Zionist migrations were disproportionately male and for the most part, an adventure of the young.²⁷ Moving across Eastern Europe—often without passports and sometimes in violation of military service obligations—scores of young men and women heading for Palestine were compelled to turn to the Jewish communities along the way for food and shelter. The disorders of war helped these Zionists pull up stakes, but their journeys were raked with dangers and tragedies. Many were stopped by hunger and illness; some were beaten by robbers, and some died in the thick of the heavy fighting of civil war. Their spirit of adventure could not help but succumb sometimes to loneliness and disease or sometimes simply to the perils of places with none of the familiar comforts of home. Many headed for Trieste, where they hoped to earn money for their passage to Palestine. It took months of travel to reach Palestine.²⁸

What was expected to be a source of personal growth often ended up generating immense suffering. The irony of having to fall back on traditional Jewish communal organizations and philanthropic customs might not have been acknowledged by these idealists but could not have been entirely ignored. For them, the journey generated a dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment. Consider this description of one journey of five young Labor Zionists, showing just how determined they had to be to make it to their destination.

The first boatload of five immigrants from [the] *he-Halutz* movement was helped by Josef Trumpeldor to secure passage on a small Turkish boat

with five Turkish sailors. After three days on the water, amidst terrible storms—they thought they would sink—they anchored on the coast and walked for three days with no food or water to Constantinople. They found the area with Sephardi families—met up with Trumpeldor and twenty others who had been transported to the city with help of Sephardi families. Trumpeldor found work for them while they waited for others. Finally about 200 gathered [male and female]. They heard that the situation in Palestine was very difficult—there was no work. They had to wait another two months before they could leave for Palestine.²⁹

The conviction that they could change the destiny of the Jewish people carried these visionaries through the uncertainties and trials of their migration. They imagined physical labor on the land as the crucial mechanism of personal fulfillment and national emancipation. Despite their certainties, however, their propensity to see the land of Israel as the place for constructing the new Jewish identity opened up the possibility of failure and of having to find ways to live with unanticipated consequences, particularly for individuals who lacked the funds to feed themselves, let alone to purchase land and build new communities.

Coming to Palestine without capital, family ties, and employment could be the beginning of a series of migrations from one temporary job to another. Public works projects often hired for only short periods, with construction jobs typically interrupted by disruptions in funding. The difficulties of searching for work in a country with few jobs available and no public postings to inform people where they might find employment accentuated the loneliness and feelings of estrangement. Palestine's economy generated severe problems for immigrants, bringing some to the brink of starvation. Political affiliations and personal contacts were vital to those most vulnerable, who barely earned enough money for food and shelter. Some contacts led to displays of unusual solidarity, where communes accepted so many workers that all had too little to eat.³⁰

For visionaries, their traumatic encounter with the grim realities in Palestine made philanthropic aid through Zionist and even non-Zionist organizations more important while it created a sense of urgency for new foundational truths. At a time when they had little power and no independent resources—and when their lives were hardly marked by feelings of fulfillment and success—visionaries considered it more important than ever to produce a narrative, not as compensation for their political or economic weaknesses or failures but rather as a means of defining and

bringing to life a new national identity. Many found meaning even in the failed experiments by framing books, plays, poems, songs, and even a new cultural form—the collectively written diary—around their utopian ideas and values.³¹

Many of the activists came expecting to live and work amid networks forged in Europe and strengthened on their journeys to Palestine. Networks replaced families, often providing access to jobs, resources, and sustained social interactions. But they differed from families because letting go of the creed often severed people from relationships that had served as economic and emotional supports. The disputes converting *Hashomer Hatzair* comrades Meir Yaari and David Horowitz into rivals in the early 1920s were not only kept alive throughout their long careers—and periodically revived in memoirs and essays—but were also advanced with the same fervor and belief as if the issues dividing them were still relevant.³² Not surprisingly, the publication of *Khilliyatenu* (Our Community), a collective diary of *Hashomer Hatzair*'s first experience in communal living (at *Beitaniyya*), also stirred controversy. Although he had written many of the diary entries, Meir Yaari himself urged that it not be published, particularly because *Hashomer Hatzair* had, in his words, evolved considerably since the troubled days of *Beitaniyya*, and was “now making common cause with mainstream Labor Zionism . . . [with] agricultural work and not Eros . . . [as] the foundation of community and society.”³³ Acutely sensitive to the volume's frankly revolutionary sensuality, Yaari never stopped trying to suppress or censor novels and narratives based on the diary of his first very intense months in the land of Israel.

BEITANIYYA

The *Hashomer Hatzair* members arriving in Palestine in 1919 and 1920 brought with them a potent blend of ideas focused on rescuing the Jewish national home from what they perceived as the deformations introduced by the mainstream bourgeois Zionist institutions. But without resources and confronting an impoverished land devastated by war, these young people had to forgo their principle of complete autonomy for subsistence and accepted the employment offered them by the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association, a non-Zionist philanthropy founded by the Baron de Rothschild and devoted to raising the standard of living of Jews in the land of Israel. Although preparing the ground for the planting of trees represented a departure from the group's ambition to engage in agricul-

tural labor, the subventions they received for this work helped preserve the friendship networks formed in Europe. Scores of young men and a few women came together to fulfill their dream of engaging in physical labor and journeyed to what was then a remote part of Palestine—the Jezreel Valley—in anticipation of uniting with the land as a means of personal growth and the beginning of social change.

Taking their earlier youth movement experiences in Europe as a template for the creation of a new community and ultimately the evolution of a new kind of human being, *Hashomer Hatzair* immigrants—particularly the group at *Beitaniyya*—viewed the backbreaking labor in the Jezreel Valley as a prologue to embarking on their ambitious visions of social transformation. The *Beitaniyya* community lasted for six months. Although the members of *Beitaniyya* considered themselves activists rather than intellectuals or writers, they soon decided to record their experiences in a text—*Kehilliyatenu*—as evidence for the possibility of creating a new social order in which communal interests were presumably but a graceful mimicry of individual thoughts and feelings.

One of the several collective diaries churned out by the people involved in these early communal projects, *Kehilliyatenu* symbolized the subordination if not the assimilation of the individual to the larger collective. In form, the collective reflections in these texts, as noted literary authority Aviva Ufaz has brilliantly observed, are not all raw expressions of individual feelings: some have been edited; some censored; some rehearse mundane events and schedules; and some try to express the congruence between the individual and the collective by describing the public areas of the camp shared by all the workers.³⁴ Some comments are the distilled musings of philosophical minds, whereas others read as if they are reports rather than meditative observations. And as Aviva Ufaz has shown, these raw expressions of individual feelings simply do not yield to any synthesis derived from Marxian or Freudian dialectics.³⁵ Instead of showing how one or another utopian vision was enacted at *Beitaniyya* or elsewhere, the texts describe how disillusionment and disaster can result when theories are put into practice.

Kehilliyatenu—trenchant and truthful—is full of testimonial imperatives fostered by the very burdens these activists assumed in trying to get things in their community exactly right.

We have moments of incredible exhilaration that can turn quickly to despair in *Eretz Israel*. We are a community of people with common edu-

cational ties and a shared past. Sometimes our weaknesses stand out—our inability to withstand the difficulties that destroy our bodies. We cry out hysterically in the middle of the night out of despair. We have no faith in the power of the individual to find a way out of the despair and so we are frightened.³⁶

At the center of *Hashomer Hatzair's* core principles was the belief that genuine community was possible only for a small population. Meditating on what it would take for Zionism to succeed, Meir Yaari, who evolved into the dominant influence at *Beitaniyya*, a settlement where there were supposed to be no leaders, stated that first it had to capture “the soul.”³⁷ Embedded in this comment is a contempt for the typical Jew who possesses ordinary desires. Indeed, *Hashomer Hatzair* never held out hope that its Zionist vision would appeal to more than a small number of select individuals who could, nonetheless, serve as agents of redemption for the Jewish people. The long tables set out for meals in other large road-building units organized by the *Gedud ha-Avodah* pointed away from rather than toward building community, according to Meir Yaari, who cited the dining area accommodating the small numbers at *Beitaniyya* as imparting solidarity.³⁸

Ostensibly operating with the efficiencies coming from the division of labor, the *Gedud's* large communes were actually attacked by Yaari as breeding grounds for alienation and social fragmentation.

Public works have an ephemeral character; they render life mechanical[,] pressing hundreds of people together who have nothing in common except the employment office and rows of tents without style or distinction. These mass concentrations have a ploughed characteristic with people who are strangers to one another eating together at long tables, singing in a false way, crying out with the bitterness of [the] European proletariat. This kind of work will truly be punishment. . . . Everyone here is uprooted.³⁹

Intimacy was both the means to a redeemed historical order for the Jewish people and the mark of its success. At *Beitaniyya*, all daily activities were supposedly assimilated into a strenuous passage to rejuvenation. Food, for example, was presented as a form of spiritual nourishment, a kind of atonement for an alienated past as well as a means of elevation toward a harmonious future. Hovering over the diners was a print of da

Vinci's *Last Supper* with the figure of Jesus taken as a symbolic representation of the meal's religious value and the group's capacity to transgress Jewish tradition and convention. The radically new Middle Eastern cuisine in Palestine was interpreted as part of the process of disconnecting *Hashomer Hatzair* adherents from their families, their homes, and the folkways to which they were unconsciously attached. One way of enduring the tasteless, monotonous meals was to be convinced that they could help reshape life.⁴⁰

What made *Beitaniyya* particularly unique was its focus on Eros as the basis for deriving full satisfaction from arduous physical labor. But although the visionaries attributed to Eros an extraordinary capacity to repair cleavages between people, they were never able to deploy that power without generating social tensions. Many of *Kehilliyatenu's* authors plead for learning how to love all people and to overcome their feelings of animosity for some of their comrades.⁴¹ Moreover, when demands from the Palestine Colonization Association to lower costs convinced the *Beitaniyya's* unofficial leaders that the community had to comply, the process of identifying the people asked to leave the commune—the so-called “grand selection”—reflected the privileged position of the Vienna cell and showed some members how swiftly the moral imperatives of the movement could be discarded in the midst of the difficulties of day-to-day life. Clinging to an idiom of unity and equality, the strongest personalities—leaders of the movement in Europe—remained at *Beitaniyya*, whereas the vulnerable were expelled.⁴² Writing years later, Meir Yaari registered no consciousness of how this action became an experience of rupture which no ritual or vocabulary could repair.⁴³ *Beitaniyya's* leaders thought of themselves as performing noble actions even when they were really engaged in vindictive acting-out and favoritism.

Hashomer Hatzair's attraction to Eros as a force that could help people escape their parochialisms and prejudices often reduced their lived experiences to dichotomous stereotypes with moral implications, pitting those deemed committed and possessed of a fortitude with emancipatory potential against those unable to contribute to the national mission because of depleted energy or misguided priorities.⁴⁴ Jews in Palestine were assailed for their inability to subscribe to and carry out the Zionist visionary projects and not for their failure to assimilate or adjust. Immigrants were blamed for not finding meaning in serving the nation with their labor.

That backbreaking physical labor did not produce a sense of fulfillment or feelings of intimacy with the land triggered profound feelings of mel-

ancholy. The belief that labor would release rather than sap energy generated a deep sense of personal self-doubt when emotions did not match expectations. Although conventional Labor Zionist pieties discouraged expressing disappointment with work—the very activity ideology associated with personal and collective liberation—the dissipation of the glamour of physical labor was too quick and complete to be hidden. One entry in *Khilliyatenu* stated that work “was choking.”⁴⁵ Another remarked, “The days are full of gloom, fog everywhere. . . . And man stands but there is no God around him. What will he do then with an empty heart and a soul without purpose confronting sickness, storms, and work—all of it boring. The clock ticks and with a cruelty, it counts every second.”⁴⁶

Although some visionaries did find satisfaction—even exhilaration—in the pain and monotony of the tasks before them, many, all across the Labor Zionist spectrum, found no pleasure in manual labor. Rahel Zisle-Lefkovich put it this way: “It seems to me that it’s wrong for a person to become a draft animal.”⁴⁷ In their first months and years in Palestine, it was difficult for even the truest believers in the Labor Zionist vision to see their backbreaking work as building the foundation of a new just society. In their desperation, these visionaries turned to their cultural resources to help them withstand their impoverishment and disappointments.

To give substance to the claim that true unity with nature would yield harmonious social relations, pseudo-marriage ceremonies were performed to bind men to the land and presumably infuse them with an intense sense of their mission. In one such ceremony, the bridegroom pronounced the following words: “The land of Nuris. This is not the ordinary name of a bride . . . [but] as husband I give myself to the bosom of my new bride and thus will we all be given to the belly of this holy earth.”⁴⁸ Although many found the rituals exhilarating, others remembered them as moments of ambiguous joy, and still others dismissed them as nothing special. And when ritual did not dissolve despair, some members began proposing that suffering, itself, would bring redemption, recalling the Jesus narrative as the appropriate paradigm. But what were imagined as restorative and transformative models by some were experienced as sinister by others. As the glamour of physical labor dissipated, so too did the fantasies of engendering a new kind of Jew through erotic relations among men and newly invented rituals to bind men to nature.⁴⁹

The diaries contain a literature of despair and disillusionment, calling attention to the heavy burdens assumed by these self-proclaimed Zionist visionaries. Theories that seemed incontrovertible in Europe were sud-

denly totally inadequate for explaining the classes, conflicts, and ruptures these young men and women encountered. Their ideologies promoting physical labor as a noble enterprise ended up crushing individuals who could not abide its strictures, or who felt a grief that could not be absolved and even contemplated or committed suicide.

Despair and disappointment cast long shadows over the lives of Palestine's Jewish community, but particularly over the visionaries, who arrived certain that their Zionism would deliver fulfillment and success but who discovered that they could barely eke out subsistence. Despair ran well ahead of their capacity to explain it. What appeared as overdetermined expectations in retrospect seemed to contemporaries as hanging in the balance. Their nationalist fervors were nourished by a belief that Zionism could restore life to the Jewish people and ensure that the horrifying deaths and destruction gripping Diaspora Jews would become a thing of the past. A newly developed Zionist ideology helped resolve the ways Jews saw, felt, and responded to their suffering in Palestine. Labor Zionists recognized that hunger approaching starvation could destroy health and morale and denude the Zionist argument about the benefits of sovereignty of its substance. Still, they insisted that while death and pain outside of Palestine were killing the Jewish people, suffering in Palestine restored national life.⁵⁰ Commitment to the true pioneer life continued to exercise a powerful hold upon Palestine's Jewish community because it presumably gave visionaries a strong sense of the differences between those who could look forward to a future and those who could look only backward to what was deemed a dishonorable past offering neither hope nor security.

Thus the people who charted their arc of loneliness and disappointment in *Kehilliyatenu* could be only marginally conscious of the real sources of their emotional suffering. Judging by the diary's comments, many of these young Zionists, sent off to the Jezreel Valley, found themselves experiencing intense loneliness. The encampments were isolated from one another and from the Jewish centers in Palestine. *Hashomer Hatzair's* denunciations of other Labor Zionist organizations as insufficiently radical⁵¹ accentuated the isolation of its members, as did the view of the general Jewish public in Palestine that *Beitaniyya* was less like a commune devoted to work than a cult organized around a theology of love.⁵² Was the *Beitaniyya* community nourished by work or by love?

Initially, Meir Yaari seemed to assert that solidarity could only be built through love and particularly through male relationships.⁵³ Yaari confided to one associate that genuine community "derived from erotic attach-

ments and not from need or from spiritual values.”⁵⁴ Speaking of Eros, one diary entry defined it as “giving individuals the capacity to redeem the world, to return it to its source of beauty and brighten it with exalted harmony.”⁵⁵ Expressions of homoerotic passions were fairly common at *Beitaniyya* but they did not necessarily shape the sexual relations of the commune’s members. Meir Yaari himself married his childhood sweetheart in an Orthodox religious ceremony even as he continued to extol the virtues of male bonding.⁵⁶ As far as we can tell, *Beitaniyya* was a sexually repressed community.⁵⁷ Although Yaari clearly conceived of sex as a symbol of larger forces, he did not seem to appreciate how much psychic weight a discourse saturated with sexual references placed on a group of young adults. Despite claims of the unifying effects of Eros, it actually ripped across the community, tearing apart friendships, generating life-long animosities, and precipitating at least one suicide. “We understand man as suffocating in a framework of individualism and as reduced and hardened by a mechanical civilization. Men must seek relations of brotherhood that combine body and soul into new unities [of men] with nature and all creation.”⁵⁸

There were very few women at *Beitaniyya* and even fewer women’s voices published in the diaries. Although *Hashomer Hatzair* men proclaimed an ideology embracing men and women as equals, many diary entries conjure up the idea of women as a source of sexual tension and of communal divisions without even considering the possibility that rifts were not accidental but rather essential consequences of the utopian project.

Nor did women experience the *Hashomer Hatzair* communities in the same way as their male comrades. Women were mostly mentioned as an afterthought; when they were acknowledged at all, it was generally for their capacity to produce children.⁵⁹ Paradoxically, an egalitarian rhetoric was also imprinted with a traditional view of the options available to women. The dreams of the girls who had filled in the economic gaps left by a disintegrating family structure during the terrible years of carnage in Europe had to be deflated as comrades urged them into domesticity and traditional family responsibilities.

Indeed, the disjuncture between proclaiming the equality of women as a core principle and establishing a model community where only men could produce moral perfection troubled as many in the *Hashomer Hatzair* movement as in the mainstream Labor Zionist organizations in Palestine. For *Hashomer Hatzair*’s focus on Eros evoked certain troubling hints of principled opposition to the idea of family and marriage which catalyzed

significant opposition from the dominant Labor Zionist organizations. Although women were imagined by a few as possessing a sinister power destructive of true unity, they were more typically associated with restorative and generative functions.⁶⁰ And as the *Beitaniyya* community self-destructed, the hostility to it from other Labor Zionist groups in Palestine and from *Hashomer Hatzair's* other communes forced the movement's unofficial leaders, including its most prominent advocate of the virtues of male comradeship, Meir Yaari, to qualify their dreams of dismantling the family and to deploy a language more readily compatible with Palestine's Labor Zionist social consensus.⁶¹ The commune would save not destroy the family.

Many women were attracted to Labor Zionism because of its presumed principled commitment to gender equality. All across the several Labor Zionist movements there were women who discharged the same tasks as men in the pioneering communities. The very idea of physical labor resonated with as much meaning for female as for male visionaries. Small numbers of these women—such as the Bat-Sheba collective comprising seven young women—did find ways to work around the constraints. But most found their ambitions still circumscribed by patriarchal norms. “Of 3000 laborers who worked in road construction during 1922–1923, only 400 were women,” noted Deborah Bernstein, and half worked in the camp kitchens.⁶² Some of the *Gedud* labor brigades helped women expand beyond their domestic horizons and gave them a new scale of expression, as Anita Shapira explains.

At Migdal, liberty was unrestrained. The girls of the *Gedud* demanded equal rights and obligations, expressed among other things in their determination to work side by side with their male comrades on the roads. They suffered extreme hardship and deprivation, and this was compensated for by the joyous group spirit expressed in the stirring songs left behind them.⁶³

But even in movements endorsing radical social change, women had to fight against gender-based stereotypes that generally kept them confined to domestic roles. To gain access to what was deemed productive labor out in the fields, women had to surmount higher hurdles than men, overcome more rigidly defined biases, and ultimately pay a higher personal and psychic price for their achievements. Here is one description of the struggle:

It was with the utmost difficulty that I, a woman, could persuade [them] to take me along. There were all sorts of objections. The work was too much for a girl. It wasn't nice for a Jewish girl to be working on the open road. There was even one *haver* [comrade] who believed that it would be a national crime! But another girl and I stuck it out for the first week and, in spite of renewed objections, stayed on. At the end of the first month, there was a whole group of women at work on the road.⁶⁴

During the first years of the 1920s, road construction initiated by the British mandate government provided jobs and for Labor Zionists the chance to establish communal settlements. Even when their work gave the lie to the dismissive estimates of their capacities, it reinforced the perception that changes for women could not occur without negatively affecting men.

Faced with resistance to their acceptance by male groups, and indignant at being accused of causing financial deficits, women formed their own work communes and even competed with men for job contracts. In the mid-1920s there were two women's construction groups, several floor tiling communes, as well as tobacco and laundry collectives. The women's organization established half a dozen training farms modeled on the Kinneret experiment. Women also formed *havurot*—small collectives based on a combination of vegetable gardening and outside employment.⁶⁵

Tehiya Liverson had a fine feeling for Labor Zionism's difficulties in establishing a policy regarding women that did not contradict its egalitarian ideology. She wrote about the difficulties of gaining entrance at the grassroots level to the Construction Workers' Union.

Some said the work was too strenuous for women. Others argued that if women were admitted to the building trade communes, which contracted for work as a group, the output would decrease and the pay with it. The Bat Sheva collective . . . revolutionized road work. All of them are working at breaking gravel and all of them are so good that they have set a record.⁶⁶

But the idea of women engaged in arduous manual labor ran against most of the cultural preconceptions of even their male comrades. When

women were allowed to become a part of the road construction encampments, they were most often designated as cooks and thus isolated from their friends or left without any work at all. In searching for jobs, women ran up against stiff opposition from the Employment Office of the workers' parties and later from the *Histadrut*.⁶⁷ Women clearly expected radical movements to support social change and open up to them a broad spectrum of opportunities. For that reason, many men and women thrashed endlessly in a thicket of rationalizations about their bounded world, where they found bias instead of deliverance. Sometimes only a single passage in a memoir conveys the intensity of the emotion aroused by the biases women confronted. As Ada Maimon Fishman writes, "Following the old traditions which determined what constituted women's work, traditions the woman pioneer . . . had fought against, the kitchen was seen as the only possibility for new women immigrants."⁶⁸

Even among visionaries, women found their lives circumscribed by the persisting authority of men infused by custom with enormous power and influence. Still, revolutionary ideals excited high expectations that allowed some women to find ways to overcome the barriers. As Anita Shapira has noted, women affiliated with *Gedud* did somewhat better than in many of the other Labor Zionist movements.⁶⁹ And some women insisted despite the general trends, as G. M. Berg demonstrates in his study of the essays written by applicants for admission to the Agricultural College for Women at Nahalal, that Labor Zionist projects offered them a genuine chance to come into their own, whether in the field or in work suited to the feminine body. Here is one excerpt from a typical essay. "We have had enough of the people of the book. Muscles are what we need! In building the Land, the woman takes on a major role, and in various work places we can find the active woman in all of the most difficult branches of work."⁷⁰

But the idealism and confidence expressed by most of these applicants also disclosed more complex ambiguities than may have initially seemed apparent.

In every production of new life in the Land of Israel . . . there has been awakened within the woman an internal desire to liberate herself from the home and to participate in activities and all kinds of productive work, but because of a lack of knowledge and prior training, she is compelled to continue in the way set out for her in advance by doing housework. And the value of this work declines until it means nothing to her. The woman, after being in a labor collective for a year or more, finds herself useless and inefficient and then leaves the group and goes some place for train-

ing. Sometimes she becomes depressed and leaves agriculture entirely and heads for the city. This is not the case for young women who have received training before entering a labor collective. They feel a sense of belonging to the collective, and they fulfill a role like any [other] member, becoming really useful to the group.⁷¹

The repeated narrative of the “pioneer” serving the nation through physical labor on the land set a distinctly masculine model for the society. More often than not, women were expected to assume whatever domestic tasks were necessary to sustain the worker and the regimen of manual labor. Having wrested their freedom by leaving home at a young age, women were typically thrown into a number of regimes of patriarchal cultures when they arrived in Palestine. The immigration quota system limited the number of single women. Many men believed that women caused “deficits” in the collectives. Women clearly operated in a strikingly different environment from that of men, as their remembered intimacies—heavily suppressed—show. Even those who achieved prominence in the women’s workers movement had misgivings.

“Superfluous”—this is how Rachel Katznelson [Shazar] and Yael Gordon, writing in their diaries, described their presence in *Eretz Israel*. Both were strong, active women who were perennially in the shadow of men: Katznelson in that of her husband, Zalman Shazar; Gordon in that of her father, A. D. Gordon (she was his secretary, never married, and withdrew from public life after his death).⁷²

Most Labor Zionists considered individual interests an obstacle to the creation of a harmonious community, but only *Hashomer Hatzair* developed a unique technique—the *Siha* (discussion)—to reshape individual character and energize passions for the new social order.⁷³ Called by David Horowitz *Hashomer Hatzair’s Guide for the Perplexed*, the *Siha*, according to Horowitz, discharged many functions, but ultimately it operated as a mechanism of oppression, coercing people to relax all of the inhibitions that kept thoughts and passions private.⁷⁴ What had been discussion in Europe was turned in Palestine into the *Vidui* or public confession. This kind of intimate discourse alienated those, like Horowitz, who preferred the more restrained and intellectual discussions of the Vienna cells. Troubled by what the *Siha* had become, Horowitz wrote about what it had been in Vienna.

[The *Siha*] . . . was a combination of instruction through discussions, negotiations, and confession. The subjects of the *Siha* included Zionist history, important Jewish leaders, principles of the ancient Jewish books, songs, problems of life, religion, love, friendship or any subject linked to anyone's feelings or thoughts. The head of the group typically selected the topic, but any member could also introduce a subject for discussion. The group was formed on friendship and mutual trust. The *Siha* was full of symbolism and poetry and sometimes accompanied by athletic activities. The talks mixed games with learning about life, an escape to nature with exercise and hikes to discussions of philosophy all the while stressing the unique experience of youth.⁷⁵

When the *Siha* evolved into *Vidui* (confession) at *Beitaniyya*, it was also transformed into a discipline intended to cleanse members of their sins and act as solace for individual failures. The particular sins disclosed presumably gave individuals a clear picture of their failures, marking instances when words, actions, or feelings did not conform to the movement's utopian expectations. Unity and harmony were *Hashomer Hatzair's* most enduring goals, but they were always threatened by special friendships, individual jealousies, despair, and longing for the familiarity of European culture (preferring Beethoven and Chopin to the music of the jackals or surrendering to the urge to stage theatrical performances) and for the warmth of family life.⁷⁶ Rather than providing instruction for the whole group, confessions came more and more to resemble trials where the confessors themselves filed the charges and testified to the impossibility of full divestiture from attachments to Diaspora life.⁷⁷

Searching for words to express the inexpressible, one person pleaded, "I am turning [to you] with these impoverished words from the depths of my heart and with a grieving soul. I want to tell you about everything that is oppressing me that gives me no peace."⁷⁸ Meir Yaari insisted on a relentless scrutiny of communal life where individuals would not be hesitant to render harsh judgments of their own conduct or of the behavior of others. One member observed that what he did not find at *Beitaniyya* was "compassion" or "consolation."⁷⁹ People who admitted lapsing into Yiddish, for example, could be expelled from a community dedicated to reviving Hebrew, though at the time the spoken language was still awkward and unsuited for describing feelings and many contemporary issues. *Hashomer Hatzair* activists believed Hebrew to be more than a marker of identity or of claims to the land; they held it to be a resource for national restoration.

Language mobilized the impulses for revolutionary change and also disciplined them. These visionaries deemed Yiddish the ultimate expression of Jewish degradation and often draped the mantle of leadership of their organizations on the shoulders of those skilled in Hebrew. Hebrew weighed heavily on the minds of these visionaries because transforming a language once reserved for sacred texts into a tongue used by the common people for daily needs symbolized the transformation of what had been understood as a religious community into a nation. Because knowledge of Hebrew was typically acquired in religious institutions—synagogues, *Yeshivot*—the lexicon developed was filled with religious phrases given new meanings and applications. Many of the speeches of such labor movement leaders as Meir Yaari, Berl Katznelson, and Yitzhak Tabenkin were packed with “kabbalistic and messianic terminology.”⁸⁰ And the poetry of Avraham Shlonsky made this point repeatedly. A committed Labor Zionist, Shlonsky could not secure the thrill of physical labor through any of the texts of Marx or of his followers. He could only convey the meaning of reconstructing the Jewish people by drawing on the religious idioms that occupied his mind almost from birth. In one of his famous passages in the poem “Toil,” Shlonsky uses the prayer shawl and phylacteries as metaphors to describe the emotions of the pioneer building the roads:

Dress me, good mother, in a glorious robe of many colors, and at dawn lead me to [my] toil. My land is wrapped in light as in a prayer shawl. The houses stand forth like frontlets; and the roads paved by hand, stream down like phylactery straps. Here the lovely city says the morning prayer to its Creator. And among the creators is your son Abraham, a road-building bard of Israel.⁸¹

A great deal of authority was vested in establishing a national language in Palestine. For visionaries, the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language both embodied the renewal of national life and served as a means of reconstructing it. In Rachel Katznelson’s words, “The revolution, the revolt of our generation against itself—we found it in Hebrew literature . . . [for] a language gives, but it also imposes duties.”⁸²

At a time when the Labor Zionists had little power and few resources, they mapped a linguistic culture intended not only to silence Yiddish but also to suppress any remnants of Diaspora consciousness and influence. When visionaries confronted the task of radically changing the Jewish people, they deconstructed these goals into a linguistic dichotomy. Although

many of the networks and friendships were forged in Yiddish, Hebrew served as the language and sign of the newly born nation, and Yiddish, the language spoken by the European Jewish masses, was the presumed barrier to reconstituting Jewish identity. Writing about the arduous labors of agricultural workers predisposed the imagination to thoughts of social progress and presented a grand narrative of unity, commitment, and consensus. Repetition of themes in a common language newly revived symbolized the national rebirth and transformation, particularly when there was little evidence of either on the land and few signs of prosperity.

The revival of Hebrew was intended as a way of ordering the experience of immigrants, shaping their outlook on the world, and rationalizing their place and identity in the developing community. But the vision of Hebrew as the national language of the homeland could not help but denote a new, deeply painful rupture for individuals now alienated from the words that could give full expression to their experiences. Their limited vocabulary in a Hebrew reborn meant that the losses immigrants felt could neither be acknowledged nor mourned. Here is one rare description of what was lost in translation. "It cannot be appreciated how much it costs a man to go from speaking one language to another and especially to a language that is not yet a spoken language. How much breaking of the will it takes. And how many torments of the soul that wants to speak and has something to say—and is mute and stammering."⁸³

Even the person central to the revival of Hebrew literature in Palestine, Berl Katznelson, had enormous difficulties learning to speak the language.

In the first days, I had a hard time with Hebrew. I had never spoken Hebrew in my life. As a matter of fact, I saw Hebrew speech as something unnatural, so much so that [in Byelorussia] I had a teacher, a man who was very dear to me—and I caused him great grief. He spoke to me in Hebrew and I spoke to him in Yiddish because I thought Hebrew was not a spoken language. When I came to *Eretz-Israel*, I couldn't make a natural sentence in Hebrew, and I didn't want to talk a foreign language. I decided I wouldn't utter a foreign word. And for ten days, I didn't speak at all; when I was forced to answer—I would reply with some Biblical verse close to the issue.⁸⁴

The connection between the revival of Hebrew and the difficulties of translating Labor Zionist visions into reality in Palestine is clear. Reviving

Hebrew was believed to be able to reshape national memory and Jewish history while instilling an awareness of a people characterized by the capacity to change and supersede the narrow canons of ritual and religious law defining the identity in the past. The more Hebrew became the common language the more the Jewish people seemed to be taking on a new form. For these visionaries, the resurrected language would invent the new man (Adam) and the new land (*adamah*).⁸⁵

The laborers lived in poverty and alienation, the physical mastery of work was a Herculean task. They had no property, no land, and no houses. They were not welcome by the Turkish authorities, the Arabs, the Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, or the Jewish farmers of the First *Aliya*. Their existence in *Eretz-Israel* was justified only by their total ideological commitment that filled the entire lives of those stubborn youngsters. The commitment was built on a series of binary oppositions: freedom versus exile, *Eretz-Israel* versus Diaspora, Hebrew versus Yiddish, Sephardi versus Ashkenazi accent, life in nature versus the imaginary ghetto walls of the *shtetl*, physical labor versus a life of idleness and commerce, the young generation versus Jewry of the past, realization of a program versus empty Zionist speeches, and—above all—personal self-realization versus passive suffering in history.⁸⁶

Particularly in the context of minimal progress socially and economically during these first years, the status of Hebrew signified and incarnated the implicit conviction for national transformation. Once Hebrew was valued for the access it offered to sacred texts. Now, the language was a marker of belonging to the Jewish nation and its homeland.

They abhorred the old social order. The place of institutions was taken by the [soul] talks, which were a quasi ritual of confession and prayer that gave expression to their anxiety-ridden world. These talks revealed an enormous thirst for a life of togetherness, an exhilaration with the new way of life, and unarticulated longings for the idyllic world of the youth movement, which became both unsettled and more mature as a result of the encounter with the realities of life in Palestine. Indeed, the depths of these talks, and the tension that filled them, had consequences for the group's social organization . . . they wanted to prove that their group did not require an organizational structure but sought a deepening of human connection through group encounters. One needs no institutions, only

dialogue. . . . But along with the dream, there was also a great deal of disorientation, inexperience, longings for the parental home, and a sense of embarrassment that facilitated the rise of strong leadership. Thus, the person who could articulate their feelings, who had the power to chart a clear direction, gained authority.⁸⁷

Song and dance were another means deployed by visionaries to forge strong attachments to community and reinforce the notion that individual desires had to be fused with collective needs and principles. Ironically and almost incomprehensibly, people who were determined to reject the religious culture of the Diaspora experienced as elevating the kind of singing and dancing introduced by those with family ties to European Hasidism. The *Gedud*, an organization that embraced the critical insights drawn from the works of Marx, also blended its radical hopes into song and dance, projecting movement and sound as symbols of the unfettered freedom it endorsed, of the capacity to transcend limits, and as a counterbalance to the severe regimentation of physical labor. Ironically, just as work acquired the status of religious worship, so did the orgy-like evening rituals follow older models of prayer.

At the camp at Migdal, a way of life evolved which came to be considered typical of the *Gedud*: an exuberant, uninhibited joie de vivre which found an outlet in wild, night-long, dancing. The joyful atmosphere which prevailed at the camp was a far cry from the sober reserve which reigned at the nearby *Second Aliya kvutzah* [founded before World War I] of Kinneret.⁸⁸

The self-proclaimed architects of radical national transformation insisted on the vitality of their programs even when their tangible goals eluded them. British rule in Palestine offered the opportunity to create a new kind of nationhood, according to Zionist visionaries, but a unity of purpose and an absolute consensus on priorities and policies could not be mobilized. But an organic national identity could be formed in speech or in song. The cultural activities once dismissed as inferior to physical labor and as a badge of Jewish servility in the Diaspora were elevated to national achievements by Zionist visionaries. These visionaries sensed the power of putting their views into verse and song and considered themselves as speaking for the nation through these cultural outlets.

The allure of their vision kept nostalgia for the world of their parents deeply buried, except on Jewish holidays, when the pull of memory could not be ignored. Ironically, the most radical communities—those modeled

most closely in accordance with egalitarian and utopian ideals—evoked the strongest laments for lost religious customs and traditions. “There is no spiritual life here,” lamented one member of *Kibbutz Degania*, “even by comparison to the most primitive people.”⁸⁹ Nostalgic memories of celebrating holidays in their homes in Europe did not renew links to religion or belief in God, but they did induce conflicting passions that could not be resolved or accommodated. Having felt what he described as “an incredible emptiness on *Shabbat* and on holidays,” one *kibbutz* member secretly attended Rosh Hashanah services in a synagogue at a nearby town and felt “equally estranged.”⁹⁰ Hemmed in by ideologies that demanded a rejection of Diaspora religion and culture as a prerequisite to emancipation, Labor Zionist radicals found their faith in social change confounded by their own feelings of loss. Not wanting to replicate the very structures of Diaspora authority or traditions of exploitation challenged through their immigration, these Zionists wanted to build a new spiritual realm based on the creativity they anticipated from engaging in physical labor and working the land. The essence of their socialist egalitarian thought led them to reject the legitimacy of rabbinic authority and the religious principles supporting it, but that very rejection threatened their own sense of authenticity.

Visionaries tried to bring their ideas of an organic harmonious community to life through performance, but although they intended to inspire attachments to the new homeland through song and dance, those cultural productions could not help but remind immigrants of what they had left behind and what they had lost. The visionaries posed a number of questions: “If we make work (the mundane, the everyday) holy, how do we make holidays holy?”⁹¹ Many wondered if holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur could be celebrated without professing belief in God.⁹² Others asked whether those who asserted the power of humans to transform a people needed religion.⁹³ Finally, visionaries feared that preserving Jewish religious traditions raised the specter of providing access to the national home for the way of life of the Diaspora. How could new rituals that strike a chord with the people be invented without locking people into old forms of worship? An experiment at *Ein Harod* with ritualized dances was deemed similar to idol worship, and the new folkways were initially denounced as entirely inauthentic.⁹⁴

Although rejecting rabbinic authority and religious law, most Labor Zionists, radical or not, followed Jewish practice at birth and, albeit to a lesser extent, at death. Male infants were circumcised eight days after birth, and burial practices generally, although not completely, conformed to

Jewish tradition. Practice departed most dramatically from tradition with regard to suicides. Because Zionist visionaries were constantly engaged in taking the measure of their own and their comrades' commitments to the cause, a relatively large number of young men and women, who by their own last testimony felt the strain of trying to live up to the standards of the creed, killed themselves. Perhaps because so many of their living comrades sensed the resonance of the suicides' despair, their graves were not dug in accordance with religious law at the remote edge of the cemetery, but rather inside its perimeters.⁹⁵ Perhaps because the suicides also triggered profound feelings of survivors' guilt when the anticipated sense of revolution and liberation darkened into self-destructive disenchantment, those who took their own lives were not to be banished from the enterprise that was, on some level, responsible for causing their deaths.

Although the poems and songs of Labor Zionism mapped out a set of new relations among people and between people and place, they also served as reminders of the vast disjuncture between the real and imagined nation, indicating that the power to cast off and take on identities was not infinitely open. Anita Shapira both captures these dilemmas and summarizes them by examining the conflicting statements of Yitzhak Tabenkin, Labor Zionist and leader of the *kibbutz* movement.

Tabenkin's approach to the way the Diaspora was represented in their education was full of inner contradictions. On the one hand, he charged that "there is insufficient knowledge of the Diaspora" and wanted the *kibbutz* child to know the tune of *Kol Nidre* as well as that of *Hatikvah* since Jews had been singing the former for 1,200 years. In the same breath, however, he spoke of presenting Jewish history through "Zionist-socialist eyes, eyes that see the Diaspora as a curse, as a disaster, that see our place in the Diaspora as a catastrophe, as a degeneration."⁹⁶

Their experience of social change at *Beitaniyya* and elsewhere forced many to abandon the utopian projects, but not to acknowledge losing faith in their restorative power. Anger, sudden departures, expulsions, and suicide shocked the members of these communities not so much into reexamining their ambitions as into altering their actions. Some shifted their political affiliations. Others, defeated by the hardships of work and loneliness, retreated to urban life in Tel Aviv or in Europe. Finally, some chose to reconstitute their communities, surviving as agricultural organizations with a diminished capacity for radical social change.

Labor Zionist visionaries settled in Palestine with a budget of expectations as improbable as they were affecting: to live by an egalitarian ethic, to create a new kind of Jew, standing erect, doing his or her own work with his or her own hands. For some of these visionaries, this great yearning for social and moral transfiguration yielded—at least in the short run—only disappointment, and jeopardized the economic and political goals truly attainable. A faith calling for self-transformation was at once noble but also destructive when enacted. Some concluded that the idea of remaking souls was, itself, deeply flawed and represented a set of impossible hopes that had to be revised to fit the circumstances and the constraints. The difficulties of living with radical social change led many visionaries not so much to qualify their utopian visions as to turn them into metaphors rather than blueprints. And because the ideas themselves were powerful, they left their imprint on Palestine's Jewish culture.

There is a great irony in Labor Zionism's cultural dominance. The Labor Zionist visionaries discussed in this chapter defined their struggles for justice and equality as part of a battle to build a national home in the land of Israel with their own hands. They posited that only the concrete act of manual labor could produce genuine liberation for a people whose identity could no longer be sustained by traditional religious beliefs and practices. Although Jewish displacements always fragmented families and communities, their unity was once preserved by a textual tradition that disciplined and unified their communities. But in a modern world, carved into sovereign states and national languages, Jews were increasingly divested of their common holy language and unmediated access to their sacred texts, leaving them with little protection for their cultural unity.

Tradition suddenly meant passivity, lack of singularity, unnaturalness, unproductiveness, excessive spirituality. Most important, tradition signified a false faith in the shared world of meanings established and transmitted by words. The ardent faith in the power of language was conceived—especially by Palestinian Zionists—as partly responsible for what they saw as the hopeless predicament of Jews in modernity. Words of prayer and learning prevented no pogroms, assured no political rights, and answered no economic wants. . . . This plight of homelessness led Zionists, and especially the founders of this [labor] movement in Palestine, to ground their identities by relying principally on the visible world of space and its transformation through human action, through collective building.⁹⁷

But if the experience of austerity and dependence in the national home's first years confirmed the failure of the visionaries to bring liberation through physical labor, it nevertheless inspired a poetics of place that ignored the present and instilled absolute optimism about the inevitability of future success. It is perhaps not surprising that in a world full of such intense difficulties and ruptures, Palestine's Jews clung to more traditions than many—particularly the advocates of radical social change—were willing to acknowledge. Culture was strengthened as the momentum for social change weakened, and it would be Zionist history's compensation for not totally remaking the Jewish people.