

Last week I was talking with Bernie Bulkin about a trip I made in 2004 to the Kinneret Kibbutz cemetery near to Tiberias. I was in my third year of rabbinic training at the Leo Baeck College. I had been studying in Jerusalem and was joining with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Students on a Shabbaton - they were five students, I was just one, so we all felt somewhat in the minority. We had been staying at Kibbutz Ginosar which is where one of the only benefits of the drop in the levels of the Kinneret revealed (in 1986) the Sea of Galilee Boat (a fishing boat from the turn of the common era). Shortly after attending the Hamat Gader hot springs and crocodile farm (hot springs also known about in the Roman period), we went to the Hamat Tiberias synagogue with the famous Zodiac mosaic dating from the mid-4th century. It was then, as the day drew to a close that six rabbinic students, our progressive rabbi facilitator and a tour guide went to the cemetery.

That year was the 100 anniversary since Theodor Herzl died. The architect of political Zionism is somewhat idolized and his vision was admirable even whilst today we regard aspects of political

Zionism as problematic. Truth be told we find most ideological movements have problems.

Indeed, as I sat on the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the beautiful Kinneret Kibbutz cemetery we compared the visionary leadership of Herzl to that of Moses. Like Moses, Herzl too did not see the realization of his dream, though he predicted that it would come into fruition 50 years after the first Zionist Congress in 1897 - what's one year between Jews.

I admit it. I was more moved by seeing the graves of some of the great Zionist ideologues and activists than I was discussing the similarities and differences between Moses and Herzl. In those days (of the late 19th/early 20th Century) it was much more straightforward to believe in an ideology and its inherent truth.

Buried in the cemetery are some of the great Socialist Zionists who lived on the kibbutz:

Ber Borochoy (1881-1917) who wrote in that vision of Socialism:

When the waste lands are prepared for colonization, when modern technique is introduced, and when the other obstacles are removed, there will be sufficient land to accommodate both

the Jews and the Arabs. Normal relations between the Jews and Arabs will and must prevail.

I repeat that we must originate independent activities in Palestine. We cannot merely content ourselves, as we have done until now, with the work of bourgeois Zionists and with our critical attitude towards it.

...

In short, we must initiate a Socialist program of activities in Palestine. Then the Jewish worker, like the rock-bound Prometheus, will free himself from the vultures that torture him and will snatch the heavenly fires for himself and the Jewish people.

Nachman Syrkin (1868-1924) who wrote the following which we now read with different eyes:

With respect to the Jews, we are driven to the sad and unusual conclusion that unlike all the other oppressed, he has no real, immediate weapon with which to win an easing of his lot. His only alternative, as it was centuries ago, is emigration to other countries. In western countries, the Jews seek a temporary solution in social isolation; in Eastern Europe, in emigration to free lands.

How shall the Jew react to his unique tragedy?

In the Middle Ages the Jews accepted their fate with resignation and as individuals fought the world for their personal survival. But modern Jewry adopted the rational means of migration. To pave a united road for all the Jews who are being forced to migrate- for the poor driven by need for refined Jews stung by insults, and for romantic old religious Jews who bewail the deterioration of the people and the destruction of the Temple; to give a rational purpose to all those who feel the pain of the Exile; and to raise their individual protest to the level of a general moral resistance aimed at the rebuilding of Jewish life - that is the purpose of Zionism, a movement inevitably born of Jewish sufferings which has encompassed all segments of Jewry.

Zionism is a real phenomenon of Jewish life. It has its roots in the economic and social positions of the Jews, in their moral protest, in the idealistic striving to give a better content to their miserable life. It is borne by the active, creative forces of Jewish life. Only cowards and spiritual degenerates will term Zionism a utopian movement.

Zionism is a creative work of the Jews, and it, therefore, stands not in contradiction to the class struggle but beyond it. Zionism can be accepted by each and every class of Jews.

The Jewish proletariat, the poor Jewish masses, the intelligentsia, and the middle class, can justifiably oppose a Jewish state which may be based on the principles of capitalism. True, the Jewish state, regardless, can greatly eradicate the Jewish problems, but the modern world is so permeated by social and economic ideals that masses will not accept, and rightly so, a capitalistic Jewish state.

Berl Katznelson (1887-1944) wrote:

Many days are commemorated at present which are artificial, with some passing importance or even none at all. Perhaps one out of a thousand will be long remembered, but the rest will wilt away after the first storm. But those days which have taken root within the soil of the nation and to which generation after generation has given of its spirit will have a different destiny. The Jewish year is studded with days which, in their depth of meaning, are unparalleled among other peoples. Is it advantageous, is it a goal, for the Jewish labor movement to waste the potential value stored within them? The assimilationists shied away from our Jewish holidays as obstacles on the road to their submergence among the majority because they were ashamed of anything which would identify them as a distinct group, but why must we carry on their tradition? Did not bourgeois assimilationism and enlightenment, and even the Jewish socialism which followed in their wake, discard many valuable elements of social uplift which are contained in our tradition? If we really are Zionist-Socialists, it does not befit us to behave like dumb animals following every stupid tradition just because it calls itself modern and is not hallowed by age. We

must determine the value of the present and of the past with our own eyes and examine them from the viewpoint of our vital needs, from the viewpoint of progress toward our own future.

The musician Naomi Shemer (1930-2004) who wrote Chorshat Ha'Ekaliptus (The Eucalyptus Grove) in tribute to the kibbutz and her parents who lived there:

When mother came here, pretty and young
Then father built a house for her, on the hill
The springs passed, half a century
And the curls turned grey

Chorus

But on the Jordan bank, nothing seems to change
The same silence and the same decor
The eucalyptus grove, the bridge, the boat
And the Saltbush's fragrance on the water

The cannons thundered on the other side of the Jordan
And then - peace returned when the summer ended
All the babies grew up
And again built a house on the hill.

And the wonderful poet Rachel Bluwstein (1890-1931) who is so well known she is simply referred to in Israel as 'Rachel the poet'.

She also wrote journalistic pieces, I was reminded of one piece in particular, 'On the shores of the Kinneret':

How does day pass at the Kinneret? Dawn rises when we begin to work. We numbered fourteen, with blistered hands and tan, bare and scratched legs. Strong faces, burning hearts. The whole air echoed our tunes, our talk and our laughter. The hoes went endlessly up and down. For a moment one may stop working and wipe the sweat from the forehead with the corner of a kaffiyeh, and throw a loving glance at the sea. So good. Blue, blue, blue wordlessly bearing greetings, healing the soul. Somewhere a sailboat floats over the water, and soon the tiny steamboat carrying passengers from Zemach to Tiberius will exhale its smoke upwards .

At noon we returned to the farm, accompanied again by the sea, a blue eye peering at us through the dining hall window. The homeland's blue eye .

The poorer the food, the gayer the young peoples' voices. We were afraid of welfare. We were drawn closer to sacrifice, to torture, to prisoner's chains which would allow us to bravely sanctify the name of our homeland .

...

On the Sabbath I used to set out for a rest in the nearby hills. So many twisting crevices, so many dear hiding places, so many green river beds: if only I could remain here all my life. It is good to walk down the path around the shore, until one sees the wall of the city and its round towers. Tiberius is ancient. It doesn't look like a city to me, but rather a drawing in a school book about the distant past. Look, these stones saw the pale face of the preacher of Nazareth. Heard the oral law of the rabbinical sages. And these gray stones even remember the face of beautiful Veronica.

It's romantic and I'm unapologetic about it. Sitting by the graves of the pioneers and ideologues the ancient and modern history of our people was palpable.

Today we have sophisticated critiques of ideology: that they are a way of creating an oppressive totalising truth; and there are always competing ideologies that seem to pull and push us. We may even reject the notion of ideology entirely.

No, we cannot again take on the purity of truth with which the men and women fought to establish a homeland for the Jewish people. I am not sure that is even desirable. The battle for absolute truth and an absolute way is bitter and harmful to all of humankind - and especially for two peoples whose histories have become so intertwined.

The 20th century was a century wrecked by ideology, there are those amongst us who know it well, and there are plenty of ghosts that still haunt us. For Jews in particular the century was punctuated by the idols of Nazism, Communism and Nationalism. Last week the Jewish world marked Yom Ha'Shoah (Holocaust Memorial Day in the Jewish Calendar). New additions the calendar which punctuate our year on top of the calendar read about in our Torah portion this morning.

The dark moment in our history, and the history of the world, was in no way compensated for by the foundation of the State of Israel which is celebrated on Tuesday with Yom Ha'Atzmaut. What sick logic believes that the death of six million Jews and six million other people is compensated for by a sliver of land? But she did become a source of comfort, for renewal: a renewal in faith and a renewal in hope, a start of the tikkun (repair). Even if the repair seems to have stalled or, as if it were possible to say, in parts has rent apart our hearts anew.

The dark moments in Judaism are always remembered but Judaism is not an 'oy vey' religion. We always try to turn from loss, destruction and despair to hope and celebration. In some respects, that is what the Omer period brings for us - an anxious time when the ancient world waited eagerly to see the success of the harvest from Pesach to Shavuot.

Our message of hope, derived from the celebration of Pesach is immediately woven into our own hopes and dreams - of what our future will hold.

I do not necessarily agree with every word of the Zionist ideologues buried in the Kinneret Cemetery, but I do not believe that they need to be discarded like damaged goods. Those early Zionist ideologues were not completely wrong.

We must not be naïve, nor ignorant of the facts and we must know the problems that we face. But within all that we can pursue a vision of hope that grapples with the multiple narratives confronting a 21st Century Jew and steer a path through them touching on some of the most profound truths in our Jewish existence. In this period of anxiety between Pesach and Shavuot, with the seeming demise of yet another round of peace talks...we must have hope for ourselves and for all of humankind. May this be God's will and let us say: Amen.