

The Adventurers by David E. Kaplan

One should not hasten to judge success by longevity. There are other criteria.

The **Bnei Zion** youth movement in South Africa did not enjoy a long innings, using the parlance of one of that country's favorite sports, 'cricket'.

On the other hand, it was colorful slog; and while their 'batsmen' were all out before the Beatles sang "She loves you" in the early sixties - having merged with its much larger and sister-secular movement, Habonim - the Bnei Zion chevra left their mark on Israel and Zionism that resonates to this day.

This was all evident to the writer who had the opportunity to examine the '**scorecard**' at a recent reunion held at moshav Timorim.

The location of the 2008 reunion is an integral part of the story. Timorim was established by members of the Bnei Zion movement in the late 1940s not south where it stands today near Ashkelon but north on top of a picturesque hilltop in the Yezreel Valley where modern day Timrat stands. It overlooked Israel's first moshav, Nahalal.

Within a few short years from when **Sinai Rome** and **Mervyn Isaacson** established the Movement in 1945, the first recruits embarked on an adventure only "for mashgenah idealists" as one person put it. It was 1948, there was no road to Timorim to speak of and conditions were primitive. "In winter one had to wade through the bots (mud) to get to the top," says **Les Sheer**, today a resident of Kfar Bilu, near Rechovot.

An indication of how "mashugah" or idealistic these youngsters were is apparent in **Norman Spiro's** account of how on the way from Cape Town to fight in Israel's War of Independence in 1948 he stopped off at the Hachshara farm near Johannesburg, where his fellow Bnei Zion chevra were preparing for life in Israel. "I was handed two eggs stamped with our movement's logo and instructed to personally hand it to the chevra at Timorim. I did not shirk from this crazy instruction and schlepped these eggs half way across the world to Timorim. On the way our ship stopped at Marseilles where we picked up Holocaust survivors en route to Israel. Some of them I believe were returning survivors from the Exodus."

Norman would spend many a weekend on leave from the army at Timorim. History is indebted he did. He lugged with him a 16mm movie camera and shot reels of footage of life on the young settlement, showing the primitive housing, working in the fields and "the wedding of **Chaim Goldblatt** and **Rochie Heller**, officiated by the "little" bearded rabbi

from Nahalal.” Together with many photographs on exhibit, reunion guests were treated to a showing of Norman’s movie and transported to an age and a place that is no more. In 1952 the cataclysmic schism that tore apart the kibbutz movement, splitting families and friends, expunged this group from its picturesque hilltop and imbedded them where they have been for the last 55 years. This happened even though “we were not connected with their ideologies,” says Les who was the Mirakez Meshek at the time - responsible for the management of the settlement.

The irony was not lost. Bnei Zion, whose members shunned party ideology in South Africa, would in Israel become casualties because of it.

Sinai Rome, the co-founder of the Movement explains: “We founded the Bnei Zion specifically as a reaction to the left-leaning trend of Habonim, which I had been a member since 1933 when it was essentially a Jewish scout movement. Our aim was to establish a movement that was purely Zionist with no party-political orientation.”

Fully conversant in ten languages it was little wonder that Sinai would work in the diplomatic service. He would serve as Israel’s ambassador to Ecuador as well as acting ambassador to Canada. For Sinai, diplomacy has had its spinoffs. While delivering a lecture at the Central Synagogue in London “this gorgeous woman from the Ladies Guild offered me some tea.” Smitten, panic set in, as he wondered if he stood a chance. “Is she not too young for me?” he pondered. Percolating the line of Robert Burns ‘Faint heart ne’er won fair lady’, “I offered her a ride back to her work and three months later we were married.” Now, twenty-five years, later, Beverly watched proudly as her husband gave the keynote address, recalling and regaling the past.

Micky Glass came to the reunion from Cape Town. He should have arrived five decades earlier. **Metro** learnt how at the age of 18, Mickey wanted to make aliya, but knowing this would not meet with his father’s approval, he engineered an elaborate escape. With the help of his Bnei Zion cronies he climbed out of his bedroom window late at night, took the train to Johannesburg and was about to board a plane for Israel, when he was arrested by the police. His father was no schlemiel - he had caught up with him.

Such was the enthusiasm for Israel and the lengths some of the chevra go to. When reunion organiser **Gidon Katz** arrived in 1955 on Machon “I brought with me a letter from my parents granting me permission to be conscripted into the IDF. They laughed at

me and said “Listen. Our wars do not last too long, so by the time you finish your training, all the action will be over. You focus on becoming a madrich.”

One of Micky’s chanichim from the 1950’s was **Isaac Bloch**, a property developer today in Herzliya Patuach. “I was 8 years old when Michey was my madrich,” and credits him many years later for “encouraging me to come on Machon.” A few years later, after completing an MBA at Columbia University, Isaac made aliya. He too testifies to the “role youth movements play in fuelling aliyah.”

“I was a naughty bugger,” says Isaacs’s cousin. “At my first machaneh (camp) in Lakeside - I must have been about ten - they covered me one night from head to foot with nugget boot polish. No part of my body was spared.” **Mendel Kaplan** implies he may have had it coming. From “Naughty bugger” Mendel would emerge in 1987, as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Jewish Agency. His tenure of eight years was marked by several historical events that rank as salvation sagas worthy of biblical comparison. ‘Operation Solomon’ was nothing short of a miracle. For centuries, the Jewish world was not even aware of the existence of an ancient Jewish community in the northern province of Gondor. A total of 14,324 Ethiopian Jews were rescued and resettled in Israel.

No less a modern-day exodus was the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. Jewish Agency emissaries were sent to the far corners of the Commonwealth of Independent States – to communities that had been cut off from organized world Jewry for more than two generations. In a short space of a few years, Russian-speaking people in Israel rose to one fifth of the population with its own political party in the Knesset.

FRONTIER LIFE

While sitting and exchanging stories, many thought back to the early days of Timorim in the north.

“Our fields were nearly a two hour drive away by tractor,” relates Les. “They were east of Afula, near the Jordanian border. Being so far away, we used to set up camp there in season and spend periods of a week to ten day there at a time. Showers! In our dreams! We had no such luxuries. The water was brought in a mobile tank and used only for cooking, drinking and very sparingly for washing.”

So where was the water for irrigation?

“We farmed only "dry" crops - wheat, barley, corn and hay; all reliant on rainfall. If there was a drought, you had it.” Life was harsh.

“Our wives used to take turns to come and cook. Life was also dangerous. We always had to be watchful for Arab marauders. There was no fence separating us and Jordan and we used to have an extra person on the tractor with a rifle over and above the driver who had his Sten gun beside him. We had some close shaves, but that was frontier life.” There were the lighter moments.

THE MILKY WAY

Les regaled about his first experience in milking a sheep “which was always carried out at night. Don’t ask me why - don’t know till this day! Anyway, there was no electricity, only paraffin lamps, so I couldn’t see too well what I was doing. I was designated a sheep and told to get cracking. I followed their instructions by squeezing the teat in a downward motion and the next moment found myself sprawled on my back. Determined not to let a sheep get the better of me, I attacked the teat again and...thump! After being kicked a third time, the boys were hysterical. They had set me up with a bloody ram.”

On another occasion when the Bnei Zion chevra were on Hachsharah on Gvat before moving to Timorim:

“we were working with these young recently released Palmachim who thought they knew everything,” continues Les. “This bloke comes in, sees no milk in the cooler, so opens the fridge and helps himself to some bottles. I tried to stop him but to no avail so I walked into the dining room for lunch. About ten minutes later the man in charge of the cows comes storming in, shouting:

“What the bloody hell is going on here? The expert has come to do the artificial insemination of the cows and all the semen in the fridge is missing. Who the hell is responsible?”

Back on the hill, business was better. A sheet metal factory was established by **Chaim Chait**, who had arrived on the famed ship from South Africa, the ‘**Drom Afrika1**’, which had successfully dodged the British naval forces by posing as a fishing trawler and arrived in Haifa bay the same day in 1947 as the Exodus. He was joined by his brother **Max**. Both had joined fighting units in the War of Independence. Their first major order in their new enterprise on Timorim was to supply the ducting for air conditioners to the first

Dan Hotel in Tel Aviv. The business became so successful that it emerged into **Miromit** (the world's first solar heating factory), which is Timorim spelt backwards.

Shortly afterwards, Timorim, then relocated to its present position in the south, was again making history. "Our next big order was to supply the ducting for **Shimon Peres'** 'textile' plant in Dimona," revealed another reunion participant, still finding the need to impart this knowledge quietly.

Attending the reunion from Kibbutz HaSollelim in the Lower Galilee was **Doddie Gordon**, who has established a **Bnei Zion Memorial Park** on his kibbutz for all former members who have passed away in Israel. Why Doddie and his garin of some twenty-five members opted for HaSollelim and not Timorim, which had been founded by "my revered madrichim and shlichim", is not an unfamiliar story of a next generation wanting to carve out their own destiny. "What's more, when they relocated to the south and opted to become a moshav rather than remain a kibbutz we felt it was it not attractive for the young members of the Movement."

Pictorial Past

Black and white photos adorned the display boards of summer camps at Lakeside near Cape Town. In uniform and in bathing costume, outside tents and on the beach, they capture the spirit of youngsters having fun but also the promise of '*great expectations*' far removed from the sand dunes and bush of Lakeside.

It was inevitable that many of those smiling faces of boys and girls would make their mark in Israel; fighting in its wars, establishing settlements and businesses or reaching the pinnacle in their professions or trades. "My parents were dead against me coming to Israel," admits Les Sheer, "But Israel offered me the most exciting life I could not have experienced anywhere else in the world. I would not have changed anything."

Written by David E Kaplan in 2008

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