

Fourth Conversation

Chapter Six: Housing Estate 1957

Precis

In chapter six, Shavit chronicles a time when the population more than doubled as hundreds of thousands of immigrants poured into the young country. The majority of immigrants came from great trauma, whether the trauma of the Shoah or the trauma of radical and sudden dislocation from Arab lands. Through four personal stories, three from central and eastern Europe and one from Iraq, Shavit leads us into the lives of some of the traumatised Jews who arrived in the country in these years.

Two of the young men Ze'ev Sternhall and Aharon Barak (their new names), were delighted to arrive, feeling tremendous anticipation about the chance to build a new future in a safe haven of which they already felt deeply proud. They rapidly turn themselves into success stories of transformation and progress. The third figure, the writer Aharon Appelfeld, finds adjustment to the new society much more difficult, searching for the old European Jewish society that he had known and loved. He became a chronicler of alienation and most of his writing focusses (not uncritically) on the European world left behind. For Louise Aynachi from Iraq, her day of Aliyah is a day of mourning for the life left behind.

Through these four principal figures (with others in the background) Shavit draws a picture of a traumatized society which refuses to a large extent to recognize or even to legitimize the trauma of the different individuals, so busily is it engaged in the building of state-building in the 1950's.

Quotations and Questions

I had been in the country only a week. I didn't speak the language, I didn't know the land. But when I took off my old clothes I shed the past, the Diaspora, the ghetto. And when I stood in the Atta store in a khaki shirt, khaki trousers, and sandals, I was a new person. An Israeli. In all of these schools Ervin [Aharon Appelfeld] felt totally alone, without family or community. He found no common ground with the arrogant Sabras, the Oriental newcomers, or the ill-mannered Israeli girls... On Saturday nights he... would sit at a seaside cafe watching the people pass by. Some were Holocaust survivors, others were Arab-world survivors, but what Appelfeld saw were human wrecks. He saw the uprooted Jews of the twentieth century, whose lives had been shattered by disaster. One blow followed another... On top of that was the DDT, the humiliation of life in a tent, the condescending attitude of veteran Israelis, the scornful attitude of the Ashkenazi immigrants. And the fact that in Israel, Jewish Baghdad was not perceived as the cradle of a great civilization but as the unknown territory of barbarians. Within one week they experienced a sudden fall from paradise to humiliation and deprivation.

- ◆ Do you believe it is possible to shed one's identity and adopt a new one so swiftly, like the first quotation, or do you believe it is a painful or impossible process like the second two quotations?
- ◆ Each of these aliya stories are extremes of either overwhelming excitement and adaptation, or dispiriting alienation. Does Shavit's telling of all these either-or stories in one chapter reinforce an understanding of the binary extremes of aliya, or does the difference in the stories give you a stronger picture of variety and complexity?
- ◆ The tales are full of extreme highs and extreme lows. Do you believe this is a reflection of the times they were living in, or a reflection of the way our memories have a tendency to over-dramatize?

Although development was rampant, social gaps were narrow. The government was committed to full employment. There was a genuine effort to provide every person with housing, work, education, and health care. The newborn state was one of the most egalitarian democracies in the world. The Israel of the 1950s was a just social democracy.

- ♦ Do you know of any country today whose development is rampant, and is also a just social democracy?

For its outstanding economic, social, and engineering achievements, the new Israel paid a dear moral price. There was no notion of human rights, civil rights, due process, or laissez-faire. There was no equality for the Palestinian minority and no compassion for the Palestinian refugees. There was little respect for the Jewish Diaspora and little empathy for the survivors of the Holocaust. Ben Gurion's statism and monolithic rule compelled the nation forward.

- ♦ In the previous quotation Shavit praises Israel's egalitarianism and social justice. Yet in this quotation he writes passionately of a "moral price". Do you believe the lack of rights described here cancel out the morality of the egalitarianism describe previously?
- ♦ What is the emotional effect of learning of egalitarian progress first, and learning of human rights violations second? Why do you think Shavit chose this order?

But the miracle is based on denial. The nation I am born into has erased Palestine from the face of the earth. Bulldozers razed Palestinian villages, warrants confiscated Palestinian land, laws revoked Palestinians' citizenship and annulled their homeland. By the socialist kibbutz Ein Harod lie the ruins of Qumya. By the orange groves of Rehovot lie the remains of Zarnuga and Qubeibeh. In the middle of Israeli Lydda, the debris of Palestinian Lydda is all too apparent. And yet there seems to be no connection in people's minds between these sites and the people who occupied them only a decade earlier. Ten-year-old Israel has expunged Palestine from its memory and soul. When I am born, my grandparents, my parents, and their friends go about their lives as if the other people have never existed, as if they were never driven out. As if the other people aren't languishing now in the refugee camps of Jericho, Balata, Deheisha, and Jabalia.

- ♦ Why do you think Shavit uses the word denial so much in this chapter?
- ♦ Was denial of the recent past a good or bad thing for Israel in Shavit's opinion? And yours?
- ♦ What would you say is currently being denied in your country? To what extent does this denial serve any useful purpose?

The Israeli continuum rejects trauma and defeat and pain and harrowing memories. Furthermore, the Israeli continuum does not have room for the individual. That's also why the Holocaust remains abstract and separate. It's not really about the people living among us. The message is clear: Quiet now, we are building a nation. Don't ask unnecessary questions. Don't indulge in self-pity. Don't doubt, don't lament, don't be soft or sentimental, don't dredge up dangerous ghosts. It's not a time to remember, it is a time to forget. We must gather all our strength now and concentrate on the future.

- ♦ It seems like Shavit is attempting to draw the perspective of Israel's challenges in the 1950's perspective in order to explain or even justify callousness. Does he succeed, in your opinion?

Additional Sources

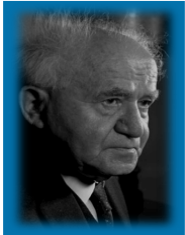


Here are three additional sources that you might want to incorporate into the discussion.

The first comes from Ze'ev Hafetz, (born 1947), writer and journalist, born in America, who came on Aliyah just after the Six Day War. Years later, wrote about his experiences. In this piece he describes his dawning understanding that underneath the celebratory surface of the society, there was a deeper sadness.

Israel meant normality, self-assurance, an end to the sense of being different and vulnerable [which he had felt as a Jew growing up in the U.S.]. That's what I expected to find in Israel, and at first I thought I had. In the weeks after the Six Day War, the country was in a state of euphoria. Jerusalem was overrun with American tourists, the August sun was bright and Israel seemed to be a nation of happy warriors. And then came the holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It was the first time I had ever experienced Jewish holidays in a Jewish setting, and it came as a shock. A wave of melancholy washed over Jerusalem. I went to the Western Wall, where worshipers from a hundred diasporas wailed heartbroken prayers. During the memorial service on Yom Kippur, I saw people tear at their clothing in grief, or pound the massive stones of the Wall in frustrated anguish. I began to realize that Israel, despite its sabra élan and Mediterranean sunshine, is a nation of orphans and refugees, a place where people jostle and bray at each other all day long and then go home to cramped apartments to drink tea alongside gilt-framed photographs of the dead. The horrors of modern Jewish history hadn't been overcome here, and they were no abstraction; Israel, I began to understand, takes Jewish pain personally.

Ze'ev Chafetz 1986. From "Heroes and Hustlers, Hard Hats and Holy Men" (William Morrow)



The second piece is taken from a speech by Ben Gurion (1886-1973) in the very early period of the state, in which he describes his understanding of anti-Semitism. He asserts that the problem that led to the Holocaust was the presence of the Jews in other countries, not the natural response of nations to that presence.

The Jewish people erred when it blamed anti-Semitism for all the suffering and hardship it underwent in the Diaspora. . . . Must the whole world act like angels toward us? Does a people build its existence on the rule of righteousness—in the midst of other nations? Do Jews observe the rule of righteousness among themselves? Is there no jealousy and hatred among us? . . . Do we relate to members of other groups and parties with sufficient understanding? . . . And we who are different from every people expect others to understand us . . . to accept us with love and fraternity, and if they don't we are angry and protest against their wickedness. ... Is it too difficult for us to understand that every nation fashions its own way of life in accordance with its needs and its desires—and the context of its life and its relationships is the product of its historical condition. One cannot imagine that it will seek to adapt itself to the existence and mentality of the universal exception called Judaism: The cause of our troubles and the anti-Semitism of which we complain result from our peculiar status that does not accord with the established framework of the nations of the world. It is not the result of the wickedness or folly of the Gentiles which we call anti-Semitism.

David Ben Gurion 1945. Quoted in “Civil Religion in Israel” by C.Liebman and E. Don Yehiya (University of California 1983)



The third piece is taken from a T.V. interview with Israeli writer Yehudit Hendel, (born 1926), on growing up in Israel in the early state years. It is a revealing piece which needs to be added to Ben Gurion's piece to add an extra dimension to the phenomena that Shavit is describing in the chapter.

To put it bluntly, there were almost two races in this country. There was one race of people who thought that they were gods. These were the ones who had the honour and the privilege of being born in [the kibbutzim or the old Zionist neighborhoods]. I belonged as it were to those gods. I grew up in a workers' neighborhood near Haifa. And there was, we can certainly say, an inferior race. People we saw as inferior had some kind of flaw, some kind of hunchback, and these were the people who came after the war. I was taught in school that the ugliest, basest thing is not the Exile but the Jew who came from there.

Yehudit Hendel 1988. Cited in "The Seventh Million" by T. Segev (Hill and Wang 1993)



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