

Conversation One

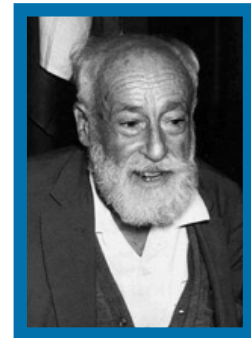
Chapter Two: Into the Valley, 1921

This chapter focuses specifically on the Harod valley, (the south eastern part of the Yizrael valley), populated by a few poor Arab villages before Zionism arrived there in the Autumn of 1921. For centuries the valley had been sparsely populated and lightly farmed. A place of brackish water and disease. Shavit describes the new situation of Eastern European Jews and of Zionism at the end of the First World War. The crisis of the former had become much more acute and the forces awakening in the Zionist movement had responded with more radical and widespread solutions, including the idea of large scale settlement in the Yizrael (Jezreel) valley, a valley that resonated with Biblical memory.

He describes the secular and socialist fervor – of the first pioneers of the new kibbutz Ein Harod and accompanies the growth of the kibbutz through its early years and the growth of this radical new pioneering force throughout the valley. The chalutzim were a collective force that came to transform objective reality and to seize control, not just of their own fortunes, but of the fate of the Jewish People as a whole. This was a large scale immigration of the new type of Jew, an ideologically driven Jew who revolted against traditional Judaism and against Diaspora Jewish history. The Jews of the “Exile” were seen as passive, weak, cerebral and fate accepting. These Zionist valley Jews were determined to create a new active, strong model of a Jew, reclaiming physicality and the redemptive act of physical labor in the Land of Israel. By “conquering” the valley through their physical labor, they sought to transform themselves and to “conquer” the “exilic” character they had inherited from their parents and which they now rejected.

Shavit concentrates on the secular "Rebbe" of the valley, Yitzchak Tabenkin, a passionate rebel and anarchist who joined Ein Harod three months after its foundation, at the advanced age of 34 (most of the settlers were in their late teens or early twenties). Tabenkin, an advocate of an aggressive Zionist activism, symbolizes the determination to end the Exile and to save the Jewish People through a Zionism very different from that of both Herzl and Shavit's great-grandfather, Herbert Bentwich.

As the Zionism of Ein Harod succeeds in transforming the objective reality, some of the Arab inhabitants of the valley move away but others stay and view the new situation with intense resentment even as their own economic fortunes rise with the valley's development. They themselves are becoming unwilling participants in a movement that they are powerless to stop. Jewish history is being transformed and the Arabs are relegated to being onlookers in a historical process that they can neither control nor understand.



Quotations and Questions

Herzl's Zionism of 1903 found the use of force unacceptable. But seventeen years later, Zionism was no longer so fastidious. The Great War and the Great Revolution had hardened hearts.

- ♦ Why do you think Shavit starts his journey in the valley?
- ♦ What qualities of the chalutzim and of early Zionism is he trying to introduce us to?
- ♦ To what extent do they impress you?

The move is not only brilliant, it is brave. The young Labor Brigade comrades settling in the Valley of Harod do not ask themselves how the eighty thousand Jews living in Palestine in 1921 will deal with the seven hundred thousand Arabs. They do not ask themselves how a tiny avant-garde of ten thousand Palestine socialists will lead the fifteen million of the Jewish Diaspora on an audacious historical adventure. Like Herbert Bentwich, the seventy-four are blessed and cursed with convenient blindness. They see the Arabs but they don't. They see the marshes but they ignore them. They know that historic circumstances are unfavorable but they believe they will overcome them.

- ♦ Like Herbert Bentwich, the seventy-four are blessed and cursed with convenient blindness.” In what way are they blind in his opinion?
- ♦ With his triple paradox - a “convenient” blindness that is both “blessed and cursed”, Shavit begins his book-long search for what we may call “the phraseology of complexity”. Does this embracing of complexity help you understand Israel more, or less?
- ♦ Have you ever come across activists for any cause that strike you as “blessed and cursed” with a blindness? Has their blindness led them to be more or less effective as activists?

The seventy-four twenty-year-olds launching Ein Harod rebel against the daunting Jewish past of persecution and wandering. They rebel against the moldering Jewish past of a people living an unproductive life, at the mercy of others. They rebel against Christian Europe. They rebel against the capitalist world order. They rebel against Palestine's marshes and boulders. They rebel against Palestine's indigenous population. The...pioneers rebel against all forces that are jeopardizing Jewish existence in the twentieth century as they pitch their tents by the spring of Harod.

- ♦ Have you ever imagined Zionism and Zionists in terms of “rebellion”?
- ♦ As a youth-led passionate rebellion, they were shooting in many different directions. Shavit names six. In how many of these rebellions would you say they were successful?

Step after step, they sow wheat and barley, and when they return to the encampment at the end of the day, everyone gathers around them in glee. After eighteen hundred years, the Jews have returned to sow the valley. In the communal dining hall, they sing joyfully. They dance through the night, into the light of dawn.

- ♦ Do you identify with the desire to move from object to subject? From passive to active? From victim to sovereign?
- ♦ Do you see sovereign as the natural opposite to victim?
- ♦ In the terms of these opposites, did they succeed in this rebellion of transformation?

As Jewish Europe has no more hope, Jewish youth is all there is... There is hardly any time left. In only twenty years, European Jewry will be wiped out. That's why the Ein Harod imperative is absolute. There is no compassion in this just-born kibbutz. There is no indulgence, no tolerance, no self-pity.

There is no place for individual rights and individual needs and individual wants. Every single person is on trial. And although remote and desolate, this valley will witness the events that determine whether the Jews can establish a new secular civilization in their ancient homeland. Here it will be revealed whether the ambitious avant-garde is indeed leading its impoverished people to a promised land and a new horizon, or whether this encampment is just another hopeless bridgehead with no masses and no reserves to reinforce it, a bridgehead to yet another valley of death.

- ♦ What “valley of death” is Shavit referring to?
- ♦ We are used to a moral discourse that places individual rights as higher than all other. What is your response to the way in which Shavit describes them as somehow lesser?

I wonder at the incredible feat of Ein Harod. I think of the incredible resilience of the naked as they faced a naked fate in a naked land. I think of the astonishing determination of the orphans to make a motherland for themselves—come hell or high water. I think of that great fire in the belly, a fire without which the valley could not have been cultivated, the land could not have been conquered, the State of the Jews could not have been founded. But I know that the fire will blaze out of control. It will burn the valley's Palestinians and it will consume itself, too. Its smoldering remains will eventually turn Ein Harod's exclamation point into a question mark.

- ♦ What question mark is Shavit referring to? What will Ein Harod later ask, that once was a statement?
- ♦ Shavit is in awe of these young leaders. Can you imagine people you know make similar sacrifices for a cause they believe in? (Remember there were no air conditioners in those days!)
- ♦ Why do you think Shavit focuses in on the Jascha Heifetz concert (pictured above) at the end of the chapter? What does it symbolize for him?
- ♦ Is this semi-royal visit of a Diasporan artist to the hardy Israeli pioneers a symbol of Diaspora-Israel relations to this day? Should it be?

Additional Sources



Here are three additional sources that you might want to use in your discussion.

The first, by the very important Jewish and Zionist thinker, Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927), writing in 1890, is a very early call for Chalutzim to rise and take responsibility for the future of the Jewish People. This was his call for an order of what he called Cohanim – Priests – a new (for him, secular) group devoted to the needs of the People.

Every new idea, whether religious, moral or social, will not arise, will not exist, without a group of 'Cohanim' [priests] who will devote their lives to it, and will serve it with all their heart and all their soul, who will always be on their guard, to preserve it from all harm, and who, in every place of danger will always be the first to devote their souls to it.

The new idea is a way along which no man has ever passed, and every such way is in constant danger. We can neither demand from the masses, who long for life, that they pave the way by struggle for the idea, and nor can we rely on them. This can only be done by the Cohanim, who alone will have the strength and the moral courage demanded for this - and the people will come afterwards, the way having been prepared for them.

Ahad Ha'am, 1890

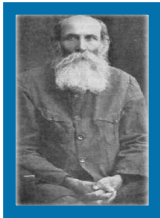


The second source is a poetic description of the Chalutz from Moshe Bassok (1907-1966), an Eastern European poet and writer who became a leader of the organization Hechalutz while he was still in Europe and came on Aliyah in 1936, joining one of the new kibbutzim. It portrays the mythical and trans-historical nature of the Chalutz in the eyes of a central figure in the movement.

From the midst of the storm of a crumbling world, and a world in the making, there came to the astonished eyes of the child, the name of strength and courage - the Chalutz.

In the distance, there still echoes the sounds of distant battles, and above his head there is the flowering of the great spring, and his soul is inflamed by the sound of a still unknown voice - the Chalutz. From nearby comes the name, from home, from the mouth of his older brother. The Chalutz. And it comes to him, like a sapling coming to its piece of earth, embedded firmly in the written tradition. The Chalutz goes before the camp. He has come from the distant and barren desert, from those forty years of wandering of the people, in the wilderness of its life between the slavery of the soul, and the yearning for redemption; as a son and a brother of that legendary race of wanderers, he has come to redeem himself from all degradation, a race who conquers both themselves and their land by storm.

Moshe Bassok



The third piece is from A.D. Gordon, (1856-1922), the major thinker of the new Chalutzic labour movement and one of the deepest and most challenging thinkers of the 20th century. As opposed to Tabenkin, who in Shavit's description, cared only for the collective and for whom the individual was basically expendable (in true Russian socialist/communist fashion), for Gordon there was no contradiction between the individual and the nation. Both would grow together and the individual at his or her peak, would merge mystically with the soul of the collective.

Man, in his striving to live according to the demands of his humanity, to that image of God which is in him, must not cease to live his own life in order to live for others, but the opposite. He needs to let his essence, his individuality deepen and expand into the infinity of the world; until he becomes as one with the universe, until his life unites with the lives of all that lives, his song with the song of all that sings, and until the pain of all that suffers pain, the evil of all that behaves on an evil fashion, and the ugliness of all that is ugly, become his pain, evil, and ugliness that demand from him their correction. (תיקון)

And at this point the yearning to live "for others", "for the people" "for humanity", or "for God" will be nothing other than the yearning to live more, to live one's real and inner self, more fully and completely, to live within oneself, the lives of others ,the lives of all creation.

A.D. Gordon, 1916

If you are interested in this chapter
you might want to have a look at...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izVWbpZraWU>

<http://www.jta.org/1927/09/23/archive/3500-chalutzim-are-waiting-for-permission-to-proceed-to-palestine>