**Building and being rebuilt on ruins and acts of forgetting – Tales of the kibbutz and the 1948 war /
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A book called *Local Legends* has been with me since I was a child in Kibbutz Ha'Ogen.  It is a collection of
stories about the time the kibbutz was founded and its subsequent years.  Already as a child those
stories told to us in the children's house before bedtime has been deeply engraved in my memory.
Rereading them immediately raised the question of what made me love them so much as a child.  The
study I carried out gave me an answer: reading them made me feel that I belonged to that place and to
this community.  "Ha'Ogen[2] Stories" – which is the name I gave to the dozens of kibbutz accounts I
examined – are what Pierre Nora refers to as "sites of memory" – a place where one's intimate, personal
memories crumple when confronted with the history of the group.  The moment when one's particular
memory is expropriated on behalf of the history of the collective is the moment in which the identity of
the group emerges, the moment in which the "I" is replaced by the "we".

These stories reflect the ideological uniqueness of the kibbutz project, expressed in its pretentious
ambition to combine a national Zionist vision with a universalistic worldview in the spirit of the Socialist
International.  Each kibbutz's collection of stories is an attempt to provide a unified framework within
which the combination of "Zionism, socialism, and brotherhood of nations"[3] has real meaning,
manifested in a single group identity.  The content of this identity is defined by its interactions with
those on its margins, those who can't share that identity, the "others."   In many "Ha'Ogen Stories", this
"other" against whom the kibbutz identity is formed is the figure of the Arab.

Even though the first writings of the kibbutz stories I read was in the 1950's, the dramatic events that
occurred earlier, and which led to the "disappearance" of the villages adjoining the kibbutz, remain hazy
in these texts. In that sense, "Ha'Ogen Stories" are no different from other Zionist texts.  How is it
possible to erase that violent act from Israeli memory?  After all, we're talking about a major event that
led to the "disappearance" of more than half the people who lived in the territory of the country prior to
the war, and to the complete obliteration of most of the country's villages. Ernest Renan, the French
historian, provides a good answer to this question in his work, "What is a nation?"  "Forgetting, and I
would say even historical error, are an essential factor in the formation of a nation… Historical
investigation, in effect, brings back to light the violent deeds which took place at the origin of all political
formations …The essence of a nation is that all the individuals forming this nation have much in common
and also that they have forgotten many things."[4] Renan is saying that the creation of each nation
depends on collective forgetting of the violent deed that made possible its existence. I argue that the
battles which led to the flight/expulsion of the country's Arabs and to the destruction of their villages is
an example of the violent deed of which Renan spoke.  The expulsion and the destruction led to the
establishment of the Jewish nation, and every Israeli is obligated to forget them.  Forgetting the
Palestinian catastrophe is one of the shared elements on which Israeli national identity is based.  This
act of forgetting is also found in the kibbutz texts.  How can the war be remembered and also be

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[1] This article is part of a larger work dealing with the representation of the Arab in kibbutz stories.  Contact the
author to access the full document:  idansegevg@gmail.com
[2] The Anchor in Hebrew.
[3] The motto of HaKibboutz Ha'Artzi youth movement – Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair.
[4] Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", 1882, Becoming National : a Reader, edited by Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor
Suny, 1996, p. 45 [my translation; emphasis added]

forgotten? How can the story of the war be told without mentioning "the violent deed"? How can the story of the Israeli war of independence be told without mentioning the Palestinian Nakba?

The Arab is almost always present in the kibbutz texts that recount what life was like before the state was established, but always on the margins. On the geographic margins, where the Arab is part of actual political life, but also on the imagined margins of the kibbutz in the story, as an entity defining from without those who live within. What's in his figure that makes him so different? What is it about the figure of the Arab as it appears in "Ha'Ogen Stories" which marks him as "other"?

In reading the stories I was able to distinguish two separate and contradictory systems of representation of the Arab, which stemmed from the unique kibbutz ideology that combines universalism and Zionism. The first system is reflected in the accounts of settlement and the military struggle, tales that make a clear national-Zionist statement. The second system is reflected in the stories of neighborliness and coexistence that express the universalistic aspects of the kibbutz ideology and require a different way of representation of the Arab. I will focus here on the first system.

From the moment the first kibbutzim were established, the kibbutz movement was a central component of "practical Zionism," which devoted its major efforts to settlement and to building a Jewish military force as a way of ensuring the creation of the Jewish state. In that sense, these are stories in which the small kibbutz community is in dialogue with the broader Jewish nation, trying to situate itself as a pioneering force in the efforts that led to the creation of the nation. Since the Arab never appears as the "hero" in these stories, it will be hard for the reader to identify with his figure or even to understand his motivations. Not one of the kibbutz stories describes in a straightforward way the dramatic change that took place in the lives and destiny of the country's Arabs during the years before the state was created. Even though this was a fateful historical turning point that massively disrupted the lives of the Palestinian majority, their story is marginalized and echoes only faintly between the lines of the texts.

The story of kibbutz settlement is often based on the myth of "the empty land", a fundamental myth in Zionist ideology. According to this myth, Palestine was uninhabited and desolate, and during 2000 years the land was only waiting for the Jewish people to come back and to save itself from it being a wasteland. The arrival of Jewish settlers symbolizes the moment the land was redeemed from its desolation. The Arabs' disappearance from the narrative by the use of the myth of "the empty land" ensures the act of forgetting the violent deed that emptied the land of its Arabs de facto.

The first example given of this myth in a text can be found in the story, "Redeeming the lands,"[5] that appears in a collection of accounts documenting the history of kibbutz Yechiam[6]: "There were three thousand, three hundred forty two dunams of stony ground, **unimaginably hostile and desolate**." Phrases like "redeeming the lands," "stony ground," "desolation" connected to the myth are intrinsic to these stories to such a degree that their careless use contradicts what happens next: "On these lands…**as we said, lived Bedouin from the A-Sawitat tribe** who grew tobacco. The terms of sale required them to leave the area; they had already received the compensation to which they were entitled. But they refused to abandon the land, **hoping by their brazenness to be paid a second time."**

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[5] Mordechai Shechevitz, "Redeeming the lands," in <u>Kibbutz Yechiam – Jubilee Volume, 1946-1996</u>. 1996 [in Hebrew]

[6] A Kibbutz located in the western Upper Galilee region of Israel - about five miles south of the border with Lebanon.

So, it turns out that this desolate land wasn't empty after all, despite what the story said in its beginning. First of all, the land was already settled; second, it was also cultivated, and used for raising tobacco. It also transpires that it was not the land which was **hostile in its desolation,** but the previous inhabitants who were hostile to the new settlers' presence. But the author, who attempts initially to obfuscate the presence of the Bedouin inhabitants living there, tries to attribute the hostility to nature. But from the moment the text mentions the Bedouin who live there it appears that the myth of "the empty land" has lost its effectiveness, and the author embarks on a different strategy of erasure.

Earlier the author writes that the land had been bought "from a Christian Arab named Khawuwah."[7] That is how we learn that the Bedouin lost the land on which they lived without having been a party to its sale. It is not hard to understand why they refused to leave. But the author interprets their determination to remain as "brazenness" and as their desire to receive additional compensation. That's how he sunders the connection between the Bedouin, the land, and the place. While the Jewish settlers "redeem" the land, the Arab inhabitants hold on to it only because of greed. The text concludes by telling us how the kibbutz was established on that land. There is no mention again of the Bedouin, nor is there any description of the event that led to their ultimate departure.

The story, "Occupying the hill,"[8] recounts the establishment of kibbutz Sarid[9] on Khanifes hill in 1924. This story also combines the myth of "the empty land" with references to the Arab inhabitants who lived on those lands, but this time in the reverse order. Already at the beginning of the story it is clear that when the first members of the kibbutz arrived "some 15 - 18 tenant farmers and their families were living on the land." Later in the story we learn about the lives of some Arab families who lived on Khanifes hill, and their hardships as poor farmers exploited by the landowner. Subsequently, after we have already been told about the lives of the local Arabs, we read the following sentence: "Thus began **our conquest of this desolate land.**" So, while the kibbutz members "redeem the land," the local Arabs become invisible and cease to appear in the text.

But there are signs earlier. Previously we read that "the area of the cemetery those tenants left behind **exceeded that of the locality at the time.**"[10] I view the mention of the cemetery as a way of justifying the future erasure and the use that will be made of the myth of "the empty land." The author tries to imply that the local Arabs are dying out and that the members of the kibbutz have no part in that process. Later he writes, "Thus, **most of the area remained fallow**; the tenant farmers or the inhabitants of the neighboring village of Mujdal had cultivated only a small portion of it." Here, again, the author prepares to employ the myth of "the empty land" by describing it as neglected and unworked. But this sentence follows the earlier statement that "…**the khurfeish and the khubeizah** flourished here during the winter; the tenant famers picked them in order **to prepare a thin porridge**." So the fallow lands provided sustenance to the Arab inhabitants, but, as I noted earlier, the author insists on describing the land as unused, and "waiting to be occupied."

The author of "Occupying the hill" attempts somehow to resolve the contradiction between the fact that the site was already inhabited and the claim that the place was barren by drawing a parallel between the meager existence of the Arab residents and the poverty of the land and its neglect. Thus, by means of an inversion, the description of how productive the land became after the kibbutz settlers

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Haim Hermoni, "Occupying the hill," <u>Sarid – 25 years 1926-1951</u>, 1951, pp. 50-51 [in Hebrew]
[9] A kibbutz situated in northern Israel in the Jezreel Valley.
[10] Ibid.

arrived testifies to their "natural right" to that land.  So, dialectically, as a negation of the "other," a significant element of kibbutz identity is established – the powerful, natural connection of the Hebrew pioneer to his land.

Kibbutz Yiftah[11] was established next to the ruins of a small village that was located near the kibbutz.  A section of *A Home in the Hills – Tales of Kibbutz Yiftach*, is devoted to the history of that village.  "Nebi Yusha is the little village located on the eastern side of the Kadesh basin, looking onto the Hula Valley and the Golan Heights.  **The village is very small, and is clustered around the holy tomb of Nebi Yusha.** As in the case of many such villages, **there was first a tomb**, and as time passed a few families **settled there** to serve the needs of pilgrims who came to pray and celebrate. Those families grew and extended the area of settlement; people begin engaging in commerce, a community developed and the location became a village.  **The houses were demolished following the war of independence and the stones and the wooden and iron beams were taken to be used by the expanding (Jewish) settlements in the area.** Only the tomb and its surrounding three-domed structure remained."[12]

The description of the village of Nebi Yusha is reminiscent of the description of Arab settlement in the previous story.  Here, too, the description of the tomb is central to the description of the village.  In fact, the author claims that the tomb served as the essence of the village's existence that "grew" around it, and so he devotes the whole story to the tomb but greatly minimizes the importance of the people who lived "surrounding the tomb."  The account of the destruction of the village follows immediately upon the account of its creation.  The focus on the tomb, but absent of the description of the lives lived there, makes almost superfluous any need to explain what became of the villagers and helps avoid any description of "the violent deed."

The story continues with an historical account of the tomb and a search for its Jewish origins:  "**As you know, the Arabs adopted for themselves some of our forefathers and holy men, making them their own.** Our scholars tried to identify the prophet Yusha, to discover his origin **and perhaps even his Jewish roots.**  The simplest solution would be to assume that Yusha is no other than **our own Joshua ben-Nun.**  Although the bible explicitly states with respect to the burial of Joshua, the great leader, who conquered the land of Israel that 'they buried him in the border of his inheritance in Timnath-serah, which is in the hill-country of Ephraim, on the north of the mountain of Gaash,' (Joshua 24:30), but when it comes to the tombs of holy men, **it's also possible to ignore the written text.**  According to another version, the tomb is that of the prophet Hosea ben Ela, whose book is the first in the series of twelve prophets known as the "twelve" in Aramaic.  But there's no firm evidence for or against this hypothesis either.  Yithak Hollander believes…that Yusha is an Arabic corruption of the name of the holy man buried there whose name is Rabbi Yossef From Malkhiya … but, in any event, we are not able today to determine unequivocally who Nabi Yusha was; the question requires further research."[13]

Thus, there's no religious motive for seeking the origins of the tomb in Jewish history, but rather an attempt to create a myth directly linking ancient Jewish history to the activities of contemporary Jewish settlers. That is how the author tries to create some kind of historical continuity intended to justify Jewish settlement of the area and link the contemporary pioneers and conquerors of the land to the nation's great heroes of the past.  Calling on ancient history serves to conceal the violence that made

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[11] Kibbutz Yiftach, a member of the United Kibbutz Movement, was established in 1948 in the Upper Galilee, on the Lebanese border.
[12] Hanan Sever, "Nebi Yusha," <u>A Home in the Hills – Tales of Kibbutz Yiftach</u>, July, 2000, p. 130
[13] Ibid, p. 131

possible Jewish settlement at this location in modern times and also minimizes the religious significance of this site for Arabs.

Many "Ha'Ogen Stories" are devoted to describing the military role of a particular kibbutz in the war of independence or during events in the decades preceding the establishment of the state of Israel. Jewish military activity was just beginning when the violent events between Jews and Arabs occurred in 1929 and between 1936 and 1939. Tales of this period focus on the kibbutz's role in establishing a Jewish army in Palestine.

Here is how the story entitled "During the events in 1929"[14] describing an additional chapter in the history of kibbutz Sarid, opens:  "One night while he was guarding our fields one of our members wounded an Arab from a nearby village - a potential thief and a robber."[15] Characterizing the wounded man as a thief or potential robber provides, of course, a justification for wounding a man who may have been innocent.  Later in the text the two Arab policemen, who were sent by the British police to protect the kibbutz from retaliation, are described in the following way:  "We had no doubt:  if something were to happen tonight, two **thugs** were already among us, ready to act.  **The law's emissaries – one was a real Bedouin and the other had just the face of a killer**…"[16]  Again the Arabs appear in the text as thieves and murderers, though they had committed no crime.

From the perspective of British colonial logic, which tried to ignore the tensions between Jews and Arabs, the sending of two Arab policemen to protect the kibbutz against retaliation was an act designed to insure social order and peace.  But the author derides this logic.  The text associates law and order exclusively with Jews – and in this case with the members of the kibbutz.  The Arabs, on the other hand, are pushed to the criminal margins of society, seen as confirmed robbers and murderers.  As far as the author is concerned, every Arab, no matter who they are, is a danger to every decent society (that is, a non-Arab society). In that context the combination of "Arab-policeman" is presented by the author as an absurd, ridiculous oxymoron.  As it turned out, and is mentioned in the last part of the text, kibbutz Sarid was not directly threatened by violence during the events of 1929. Nevertheless, characterizing the Arabs who lived nearby as lawbreakers in league with the British policemen helps justify the establishment of an armed military force in the kibbutz:  "The events of 1929 culminated without our forces being harmed directly…but they provided an impetus for the Jewish Yeshuv, including us, to depend no longer on favors from the part of the (British) government but instead to strengthen our ability to defend ourselves."

Another book, *Rebelling against the Wilderness*,[17] recounts the settlement of Beit Eshel[18] and the part it played in the war.  Its members had formed a cooperative of combatants, but left after the war and scattered among other kibbutzim and moshavim.  Beit Eshel had been established for explicitly military purposes and was intended to ensure Jewish control of the Negev.  In these stories dedicated to the description of the armed encounter between Jews and Arabs, the Arab no longer appears as a neighbor but only as an enemy, so there is no interaction with him beyond a violent military confrontation. In

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[14] Menachem Zentner, "During the events in 1929," <u>Sarid – 25 Years. 1926-1951.</u> 1951, pp. 254-255. [Hebrew]
[15] Ibid, p. 254.
[16] Ibid., p. 255
[17] Dan Bar-On, <u>Rebelling against the Wilderness</u>, The Story of Beit Eshel 1943-1948.  Published by Moshav Yogev. [Hebrew]
[18] Beit Eshel was a cooperative settlement in the Negev established in 1943 together with two kibbutzim of the HaShomer HaTza'ir, Revivim and Gvulot, in an attempt to fix the southern border of the future state.

these accounts there is an effort to describe the entire Arab population as suffering from moral deficiencies that threaten the entire Jewish population, and particularly the kibbutz. Arabs are consistently characterized in the text as a bloodthirsty mob behaving with untrammeled, brutal violence.

*Rebelling against the Wilderness* contains many examples of this approach. "The British actions had apparently been coordinated with the **Arab gangs**, who arrived immediately **and slaughtered the helpless guys**[19]", "The British police brought us three of them, Palmach fighters, **naked, their corpses ripped to pieces** after they were killed; the next convoy reaching us came under massive attack and was unable to return immediately because **its members would have been slaughtered**, pure and simple."[20] Here, too, the violence is presented as incomprehensible, savage and bestial, lacking any rational justification. In fact, this is not even a description of a conflict between two national movements. These texts, in their emphasis on the *sui generis* and inexplicable nature of Arab violence, deny its very national character.

The description of the collective of combatants as a community who is struggling to remain on its land despite of the war surrounding it, and repeatedly confronts the terrible violence directed at it, creates a one-sided portrait of violence as originating on the Arab side and directed at helpless Jewish settlers. As opposed to the detailed description of each of the combatants at the particular location, who we get to know on a first-name basis, it is noteworthy that the Arabs are repeatedly described as an anonymous, violent mass. "Even if we had been armed, **the huge number of Arabs** surrounding us would have overpowered us…**so many Arabs had assembled,** armed with rifles and automatic weapons, that the available British forces were unable to intervene in the battle and disperse the **mob of fighters**."[21]

One of the violent incidents described in the book concluded with the victory of Beit Eshel's defenders. The author concludes: "The Arabs' failure hinted at what we could expect **considering their lack of will despite overwhelming numerical superiority, compared to our steadfastness and resourcefulness**."[22] As we saw also in the other stories, here too the Arab is characterized as being diametrically opposite to the Jewish fighter. In this case the Arabs are numerous but weak-willed, while the Jews are few but courageous and resourceful. This contrast provides the basis for creating an identity to serve as a model for Jewish nationalism.

The uncertainty, fear, and distress felt by members of the kibbutz in the face of the violence of the Arab mob surrounding them play a central role in the accounts of the war in many of the "Ha'Ogen Stories." The repeated emphasis on Arab violence makes ignoring Jewish violence easier. Even though it was Jewish military initiatives which eventually determined the outcome of the war and its aftermath, they are barely mentioned in the various stories.

In *Hatzerim during the War of Independence*,[23] which describes the role of members of kibbutz Hatzerim[24] in the war, there is nonetheless a description of a military initiative aimed at capturing the town of Beersheba. This was an attack by a Jewish military force on thousands of Arab residents of the

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[19] Dan Bar-On, op. cit., p. 122
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 127
[22] Ibid., p. 128
[23] Ruth Keren, Hatzerim during the War of Independence 1947-1948. 1987 [Hebrew]
[24] Kibbutz Hatzerim, a member of the United Kibbutz Movement, was established in 1948 near Beersheba.

town and an Egyptian force stationed there during the war.  The attack resulted in the mass flight of all Beersheba's inhabitants during the night of October 19/20, 1948.

"Yehezkel led the mortar unit that provided covering fire after conducting reconnaissance the previous night.  That is when they stood on the hill overlooking the town after it had been bombed from the air and decided on the plan of operations.  Where to aim.  In the evening, before the attack, they took up positions on the hill.  They had ten 3-inch mortars…When they tried to aim them they were stunned.  **There was a dense fog; they could not see a thing.**  The time was approximately 11:00 PM.  A second mishap occurred:  **the radio transmitters were not working…**Yehezkel returned to Hatzerim after midnight, awakened Rina, the radio operator, and together they made contact with the invading force.  **They did not know in which direction to fire.**  At the Egyptian headquarters that are next to the railroad station?  When dawn broke they moved forward to the edge of the hill.  According to Yehezkel, "**The wadi was black with Arabs fleeing the town.**  I do not know how I would have responded today, but at the time it was a joyful experience that is hard to describe…"[25]

The text offers a vague description of an unclear situation.  Everything is foggy, the radio does not work, the combatants do not know where to fire and have difficulty aiming at any targets.  If we did not know the outcome of the operation we might mistakenly think that no one fired at all.  But, in fact, the description of the preparations for the attack leads directly into a description of the outcome, but there is no account of "the violent deed" itself.  "The heavy fog" conceals the moment of conquest itself and "the violent deed" that caused the mass panic flight from the town as a result of the IDF's mortar bombardment.

The battle concludes with the mortar unit's seeing from afar the wadi filled with masses of people fleeing the bombardment:  "The wadi was black with Arabs fleeing the town."  The Arabs are described as a black spot that disappears over the horizon.  Their voices are not heard nor are their faces visible.  It is an insensitive portrayal of a dramatic moment in which an entire town is completely emptied of its inhabitants.  By transforming those fleeting into a spot on the landscape their humanity is denied and their tragedy made invisible.  That is how the dim, hazy wartime recollection reduces to a black dot disappearing beyond the horizon.

The kibbutz accounts of settlement and battles expose the process of erasure and dispossession undergone by the Arabs in each of the stories.  If the Arabs were initially portrayed as natives who neglected their barren land, and later as bandits and murderers living on the fringes of local society and threatening it, the period of the war which began in 1947 marks a new, final stage of marginalization.  Erasure, which until then had received primarily textual expression, now becomes real and violent.  The image held by the first Jewish settlers of the empty land became a reality after 1947 with the flight and expulsion of the Arabs from their villages, which were subsequently demolished. Pushing the Arabs to the story's margin allows the erasure from the narrative of that violent, determining moment and contributes the creation of the kibbutz society's collective memory that imagines the kibbutz as having been created *de novo*, out of wilderness.

Edited by Shiraz Hazan-Grinbaum

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[25] Ruth Keren, op.cit., p. 58