

ELSEWHERE, PERHAPS by Amos Oz

Critical Paper by Leon Gabinet

Welcome to Kibbutz Metsudat Ram, a mythical Israeli Kibbutz
1 comprised of mythical Jewish settlers who came to Palestine
2 primarily from Eastern Europe (along with one or two of the
3 Germanic persuasion) to establish a collective agricultural
4 settlement based on principles of equality and social justice.
5 Given their ages at the time of the story, i.e., well into middle
6 age, it is safe to assume that they arrived in British Mandate
7 Palestine some time in the 1930's as part of what is known as the
8 third aliyah (the third mass immigration) in the years prior to
9 WWII.

10 An American reader not acquainted with the history of the
11 State of Israel might well ask what those people were doing there.
12 Why did they come to an arid, inhospitable land, already peopled by
13 Arabs who didn't want them there, and ruled by a British government
14 hostile to their presence. To understand Mr. Oz's story of Kibbutz
15 life, it may be useful to know something about the Kibbutz
16 movement, its history, its ideology and its central role in the
17 development of the State of Israel.

18 In 1908, a group of young Jews left the ghettos of eastern
19 Europe and came to what was then Ottoman Palestine to form the
20 first Kibbutz, called DAGANIA, or grain. They were part of an
21 early pioneering organization called BILU. An acronym of four

1 Hebrew letters (Beth, Yud, Lamed Vav) which stood for " Bet Yaakov,
2 L'chu V'nelcha," or HOUSE OF JACOB, LET US GO. These early "halu
3 tzim.," pioneers, found a harsh and unforgiving environment. The
4 Galilee was a swampy mess, rife with malaria and cholera. The
5 Judean hills were barren and rocky, unsuitable for agriculture,
6 and in the south, the Negev, was an arid desert inhabited by roving
7 groups of bedouins. Despite these hardships, the young settlers
8 persisted. Then in 1913, in Poland, was founded HASHOMER HATZAIR,
9 the oldest and most prominent Zionist youth movement. Over the
10 years, HASHOMER HATZAIR established hundreds of Kibbutzim
11 throughout Israel. Its ideology was a combination of Zionism and
12 Socialist-collectivism. It believed fervently in the dignity of
13 physical labor and in the age old desire of the Jewish people for
14 a homeland in their historic country. It is quite probable that
15 the mythical Metsudat Ram, which is the center of Mr. Oz's morality
16 tale, is a SHOMER HATZAIR kibbutz, very like the one in which I
17 spent a year and a half of my life, KIBBUTZ SASA, in the far north
18 of Israel, a couple of miles from the Lebanese border and in the
19 foot hills of Mt. Hermon. I am well acquainted with the people of
20 Metsudat Ram. Their counterparts were to be found in KIBBUTZ SASA,
21 and, I suspect, in most other Israeli Kibbutzim. I would note,
22 with a bit of pride, that the KIBBUTZ MOVEMENT, and the Kibbutzim
23 of HASHOMER HATZAIR particularly, were instrumental in the
24 formation of the PALMACH, an elite commando group of the Haganah,
25 the secret Jewish defense force that was forced to operate secretly

1 under the nose of the British, and they also provided much of the
2 officer corps of the IDF after the formation of the State of
3 Israel. I might also add that the Kibbutz movement provided the
4 early political leadership of the State of Israel. David Ben-
5 Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, was a member of Kibbutz
6 SDEH BOKER in the Negev. Golda Meir, Shimon Peres and Itzhak
7 Rabin, all had ties to Kibbutzim connected to Israel's Labor Party,

8 So now we have some idea of what brought the likes of Ezra and
9 Bronka Bergman, and of the poet Harish, to Metsudat Ram, a
10 probable Hashomer Hatzair Kibbutz somewhere on Israel's border. At
11 the time that we meet these people, Metsudat Ram is already a well
12 established and apparently successful agricultural settlement. The
13 early days of pioneering have given way to a more comfortable
14 existence, but Kibbutz life still requires hard farm work and
15 continued dedication to the ideal of collective living. Thus, the
16 work schedule and work tasks are assigned by a Kibbutz
17 administrative committee, headed by the Kibbutz Secretary, who is,
18 in effect, the CEO of the Kibbutz. So much for the principle of
19 self-determination. But some Kibbutz members are peculiarly suited
20 to perform certain tasks - thus, our friend Ezra Bergman, a heavy-
21 set, swarthy product of some Polish or Russian shtetl, is best
22 suited for driving the Kibbutz truck with its load of produce, for
23 sale to middlemen in the distribution chain. His truck driving is
24 punctuated with apt and sometimes inept biblical quotations,
25 probably drummed into his head from his days in the "Heder." The

1 scanty schooling reserved for most Jewish boys in Eastern Europe.

2 And here the author creates the first of a series of opposites
3 or dualism in Metsudat Ram, and probably to be found in any Israeli
4 Kibbutz. Just as Ezra is heavy-set and unlearned, Harish is tall,
5 blond, fair skinned and an intellectual. Using a narrative voice
6 familiar to readers of Sholem Aleichem or other Yiddish writers,
7 i.e. the voice of the village gossip who knows all and tells all,
8 we learn that there are serious cracks in the foundation of Kibbutz
9 Metsudat Ram - cracks caused by the impact of life's realities on
10 the collectivist ideology of the Kibbutz.

 In a small and isolated community like a Kibbutz, there are bound to be interpersonal problems. And in Kibbutz Metsudat Ram, as our village Yente tells us, these problems have taken the form of sexual jealousy and sexual misbehavior. Thus, Mr. Oz creates a plot based on double adultery, i.e., Bronka Bergman and Harish (the poet) are carrying on an adulterous affair while Ezra is away in the Kibbutz truck; and Ezra, not to be outdone by his unfaithful spouse, begins a most improbable sexual affair with Noga, the adolescent daughter of Harish, the poet. Incidentally, Harish's wife has left the Kibbutz and Israel to return to the diaspora.

 What is the point of all this ? Is it merely a tale of moral failure, or is Mr. Oz telling us some thing else. Consider the opposites in this story - Ezra, the nonintellectual product of Slavic Europe, but solid and hard working, as opposed to Harish,

an intellectual, a poet, probably a product of Austro-Hungary, whose job in the Kibbutz is teaching the kids. In other words, one of the tensions of Kibbutz life is the constant sub-surface struggle between the nonintellectual kibbutzniks who do the hard labor required to keep everyone's body and soul together, and the better educated intellectual members who supply the nuances of Kibbutz ideology, and who, though dedicated to the notion of the dignity of labor, prefer to talk about the idea while others actually do the work. The constant tension caused by this silent war is a fact of Kibbutz life. To put it another way, the Kibbutz, for all its devotion to equality, is not a classless society. Ergo, Ezra Bergman on the one hand and Harish on the other.

But now comes perhaps the most critical of Mr. Oz's dualism. Noga, the teen-aged daughter of Harish, has become pregnant by Ezra Bergman. At this point, two visitors come to the Kibbutz. They are a tourist named Hamburger and the other is Siegfried Bergman, Ezra Bergman's brother. Siegfried is the villain of the piece, a wily, unsavory creature with all the worst characteristics that anti-Semites normally attribute to Jews. He is trying to get Noga to leave the Kibbutz and come with him to join her mother in Germany. The kibbutz struggles to deal with the Noga problem and in the end decides to accept her and her child. A young man of her own age loves her and is willing to marry her despite her misadventure with Ezra. So it looks as if the Noga story will end well, both for her

and for the Kibbutz. But what of the wily, unsavory bad uncle, that ugly diaspora Jew who has tried to win Noga's soul and hustle her back to the comfort of the diaspora with him. What lies behind the story? Mr. Oz is dealing - and not too successfully - with the thorny issue of the relation between Israel and the diaspora. The kibbutz, representing the new, self reliant and attractive Jew, as opposed to the unattractive Jew of the diaspora. The Kibbutz, i.e., Israel- good. The diaspora - bad. And that is Mr. Oz's look at one of the most complex issues facing both Israeli and Diaspora Jews today. Of course he does not mean that diaspora Jews are all Siegfried Bergmans, but he does mean that the diaspora has a chilling and somehow undesirable effect on Jewish life. Hence, the diaspora is bad. Siegfried has become the metaphor for the diaspora. And this is the brief, cursory and simplistic treatment of the issue that Mr. Oz gives us.

The Kibbutz, because of its crucial role in the creation of Israel has long been sacrosanct, but If Mr. Oz wanted to deal with the downside of kibbutz life today, he should have given us more than a soap opera featuring an adulterous relationship and an improbable moral lapse when an old kibbutznik takes up with one of the kibbutz teenagers. Grist for the mill of the village Yente but not a real picture of the difficulties of kibbutz life today. Yes, there are inevitable sexual jealousies in a closed and often isolated community, but those are hardly its major concerns today.

In the 1980's many of Israel's kibbutzim were on the verge of bankruptcy. Agriculture was no longer a viable economic activity for most of them and they began to explore the possibility of engaging in some sort of industry - tourism, high tech, etc. The move was largely economically successful, but the move from agriculture to industry was made at an enormous cost. First, it marked the end of the period of "halutzziut," i.e., the period of the hard working pioneer Jew, sitting astride his tractor with a rifle slung over his shoulder, living a life of socialist-collectivism, dedicated to the return of diaspora Jews to Zion. Instead, today's kibbutznik is either a factory worker, a shop foreman or a technocrat. In my own Kibbutz, SASA, the major activity was growing apples and pears and dairy farming. Today, the Kibbutz manufactures a material used in making body armor for the bullet-proof vests worn by security forces the world over. The Kibbutz has become wealthy, and its members take many Caribbean cruises, where they enjoy the fruits of a capitalist success! But at what a terrible personal cost. My former fellow kibbutzniks have had to give up or severely compromise the ideology that brought them to SASA in the first place. Their weltanschauung has changed and the kibbutz is on the verge of privatization. i.e., becoming private shareholders in a corporate enterprise. In fact many of Israel's kibbutzim are now privately owned businesses, employing outside, non-kibbutz labor, so that the shareholder-members are now employers

in a capitalist enterprise. While they enjoy the fruits of economic success, they must ask themselves what has happened to their lives? Where is the socialist-collectivist ideology, the pioneering spirit and the idea of the dignity of physical labor that gave enormous meaning to their lives? A few year ago, I visited Kibbutz Ein Gedi near the dead sea and "Maayan David" The well of David, a small desert waterfall. The Kibbutz has become a tourist Mecca, and tourism is its major activity. It was personally difficult for me to see young kibbutzniks waiting on tables in a kibbutz dining room where one can order pipettes de Boeuf, and acting as maids and cleaners in the comfortable tourist quarters. Ein Gedi was once a collective, a SHOMER HATZAIR kibbutz. It is now a privatized enterprise, and the waiters and waitresses, the maids and the cleaners are shareholder owners of an upscale tourist business. Where, I ask myself is the Halutz, the pioneer of yesteryear - and is my kibbutz, SASA, next ?? These are the issues in the lives of kibbutz members today, and not the tawdry bit of Israeli Peyton Place that Mr. Oz has served up in this novel. If I, who have left the kibbutz, can feel the pain of this change, then what is the pain of my friends, the kibbutzniks of my generation, who remained and made their lives in the enfolding arms of the kibbutz and its ideology ? Ideology versus reality would have made Mr. Oz's novel a far better book, though it does not awaken one's prurient interest as does the story he has chosen.

At some future date, Mr. Oz and other Israeli novelists will have to deal with the great human cost of the success of kibbutz industry and with the pivotal change in this core element of Israeli society. What does this change mean for Israel's political future if the kibbutzim who have long constituted the leftist elements of Israeli politics now begin to turn to the right and to the center in order to protect and to promote their business interests? How will all this effect new kibbutzniks? Who are the young people of Israel who are becoming members of kibbutzim today? What are they looking for, and what does the kibbutz offer them, now that the era of pioneering is gone and the kibbutz must develop a new role in Israeli society - and what will be its new ideology? This is what serious reader want to know about the kibbutz - not the sexual misbehavior of its members.

Future generations of Israeli novelists will have to take a hard, serious look at the relation of Israel to diaspora Jewry and vice versa. It deserves better than the simplistic Zion good, diaspora bad, that Mr. Oz has given us. We will have to look ELSEWHERE, PERHAPS, for an exploration of this vital issue.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think that in creating opposites like Harish and Bergman, the author has made clear the constant internal warfare that goes on in the Kibbutz between the Intellectuals and the workers, as well as the more subdued conflict between Russian and German Kibbutzniks?
2. What has made the Kibbutz work for the last 100 years, while other utopian communities (including the Russian Kolhoz) have failed and disappeared. What holds the diverse members of the Kibbutz together?
3. How do you think that privatization will effect life in a Kibbutz ? How would the Metsudat Ram story differ if the Kibbutz were to go private? What would be the effect of privatization on people like Bergman and Harish?
4. How does the resolution of Noga's pregnancy strike you? Is it realistic ? Does the collectivist ideology of the Kibbutz make resolution easier or harder for Noga? Would her fate be better or worse in a privatized Kibbutz?