

## **Habonim Reunion at Onrus Machaneh Camp site 2-4<sup>th</sup> January 2008**

I was in two minds about going – it was either gonna be excruciating (if we tried to re-enact the ruach and play “habo habo”) or it was going to be painful and difficult. It turned out to be more of the latter although I would add, very meaningful, very important, very significant (to many), very serious and poignant. It was also very beautiful and happy and optimistic and fun. I am very glad that I went.

I must note that I didn't stay till the end and I didn't participate in what promised to be important and fascinating pe'ulot on the last day. Nevertheless, I think I got what I came for and this is what I want to relate. Probably the main event was a spontaneous sichah where we went around the group of 100 or so people, and each gave their personal perspective on their experiences in Habonim and life thereafter. This lasted some five hours and it was riveting.

This was not a reunion of chanichim, but rather of madrichim and senior tafkid holders, olim, and a variety of others. I think retrospectively this will be remembered as an analysis of aliyah and specifically of the garinim to Nir Eliyahu. I would say that the core of the reunion were the chevra from the 60's and 70's and the rest of us (Tuval garinim and others), who contributed significantly, were spectators to some very significant catharses.

I think what was abundantly clear was that the power of the influence that the movement had on all of our lives was enormous and almost universal, independent of the generation that we emanated from. While this was a sub-sample of people (who elected to attend the event) I believe that the sentiment expressed in general -that Habonim shaped our values, that it manifests every day in our lives, that we continue to do hadracha in our professional lives and that we are all critical thinkers – that this is a widespread phenomenon. Another universal item is that the relationships formed in Habonim have continued to transcend distances and decades and that for many it represents an extended family and not just a set of acquaintances.

For some, the Habonim experience was probably too powerful in that it created an identity crisis for people who where ironically not able to deal with the peer pressure to join garinim / make aliyah / reject their South African identity (during the apartheid era). These people claim that in the end they were left hanging and struggled to find a place – being uprooted and disorientated by the strong social forces of the movement. Conversely, some saw the movement as a saviour, being rescued from psychological pain that the movement compensated for. Some saw it as the sole expression of their Judaism.

The two most significant items that I came away with were these: Zionism is no longer a key driver of the movement which is explained by the fact that the reality has moved on. The post-war influence on Jewish youth has diminished and the world has become more global. The religious movement has taken

the Zionist highground and the values of Habonim are equally well served where universally applied. This has manifested in two ways. Most of the people at the reunion had either left Israel (after a variety of periods of aliyah) or not made aliyah at all - and still claim their rightful place as legitimate graduates of the movement. Simply put, Zionism / Israel is less relevant in the current Jewish South African (and SA expat) society. Most people at the reunion are struggling with their relationship with Israel (politically and ideologically) and what I described as a loose cannon ball rolling around in me, was cited by many others a similar problem. Another manifestation is that the movement today does not define Habonim as a Zionist youth movement. It is a Jewish youth movement whose purpose is to develop values that should be applied universally, with Israel as competing focus – the others being poverty alleviation, social justice, AIDS, the environment and other very relevant South African and global issues.

The other take home message was that the chevra of today (and their parents) see the religious right (-wing) as a real threat to the soul of Judaism in South Africa (and beyond). We are told that the drossim have “taken over” and are stifling debate in the schools and federation and SAJBD. Habonim is under siege. The fact that the shlichim structure has changed completely means that the youth of the movement has no depth of experience to draw on and no “established” voice to counter what is perceived to be a real enemy in our midst – they have appealed for help. One idea is to re-incorporate ex-chevra and create a post-movement shichvah of chevra who could play some of the role the shlichim did.

Just a couple more thoughts....the generational gap was very clear – in terms of the language and humour (which you would not have seen in our day) and also (more importantly) in the experience of the chevra. The 60s and 70s were a transition between the post-war and the youth revolution eras. Kibbutz and Aliyah were societally still novel and morally attractive. The 80s were anti-apartheid days and the start of the transition in South Africa. The moral high-ground of Israel and Zionism had started to slip. The 80s saw the new more locally politicized movement emerge. The 90s saw a post-apartheid Habonim dealing with the collapse of two pillars of chinuch (apartheid & socialism/kibbutz) and the zeros is the movement of today. Thus, the people present at the reunion all had a very different experience of the movement in a different social and political context. This influenced how the movement shaped their lives.

Nir Eliyahu is a fascinating study and an example of this. Many of the chevra have left the kibbutz. I did not participate in any analysis of this, but my observation is that this has been incredibly traumatic and terrible for them. There was a huge amount of pain in the demise of the kibbutz (movement) and the loss is like that of siblings and parents. Although this is obviously not exclusive (and maybe its only because I view them as my mentors) I think that on the whole, the 60s/ 70s generation made enormous commitments that I don't think we saw later on – they had choices, unlike the preceding generations who emerged in the critical era either side of the war, and unlike the choices of later generations who arrived in a modern Israel. They made

relatively big sacrifices and thus had lots more to lose. They saw out their youth and early parenting years on kibbutz. Perhaps its only now that they are at a stage where they can see more of their lives (in retrospect) – that made this reunion so powerful for them. I still have enormous admiration for them and even a little envy of the intensity of their experience.

Finally, the machaneh site is just the same, bar the solelim and shtilim chadre ochel which have been magnificently upgraded. It is magnificent and beautiful and it echos of the thousands of voices of love, emotion, joy and learning. The mitbach canisters are the same. The mitbach smells the same. The beach and lagoon are just as beautiful. The wooden stages that we built 25 years ago on A-guard are still being used (but only for a little while longer). The Swerdlows and Lucas' are still the same fantastic people they always were and I publicly thanked them on my chevra's behalf.

All in all, the reunion has reminded me of the depth and richness of my experience in Habonim – it was not so much nostalgic as it was an acknowledgement of the achievements of the movement and the amazing people it can quite legitimately claim to have produced.

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