Like Dreamers - Book Review by Motti Inbari

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Israel’s New Pioneers and Dreamers

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The Six Days War (1967) represents a turning point in Israeli utopias. The founding Israeli ethos was to establish a perfect egalitarian society. After the war, a new utopia moved forwards based on territory and holy sites. Two movements stood as the carriers of these visions — the Kibbutz and Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful). One replaced the other: while the Kibbutz was declining the settlement movement in the West-Bank was rising.

Like Dreamers by the journalist Yossi Klien Halevi masterly portraits this transformation. Halevi examined the life of seven young men of Brigade 55 of the Paratroopers’ Battalion who were called for reserve duty in May 1967, before the outbreak of the war, and served their county for five decades. All these men were determined to mark a change on Israel, and they all succeeded in their task. However, time changed them as well. Over the years, their goals were transformed, and their actions took them to new and even surprising places. The Kibbuznik Arik Achmon of Netzer Sereni became one of Israel’s top capitalists; the singer-poet Meir Ariel from Kibbutz Mishmarot turned religious; Avital Geva from the Kibbutz Ein Shemenr became a leading conceptual artist and one of the founders of Peace Now; Udi Adiv from Kibbutz Gan Shmuel was engaged in treason and gave military secrets to the Syrian intelligence. From the religious Zionists paratroopers, rabbi Yoel Bib-Nun established Gush Emunim together with Hanan Porat; Yisrael Harel has transformed a vision of greater Israel into a vibrant movement that left marks on Israel’s landscape.

From historical perspective, the remarkable rise of religious-Zionism as Israel’s leading pioneering movement came as a surprise, and Yossi Klien Halevi traces its growth in depth. Religious Zionist youth in the early days of Israel suffered inferiority complexes. They didn’t fit the Zionist socialist secular ethos and they did not take part in the ultra-Orthodox scholarly community. The Israeli victory in 1967 allowed the Bnei Akiva youth movement graduates to become leaders.

Yoel Bib-Nun and Hanan Porat were graduates of Merkaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and they believed that the rise of Zionism represents the first steps of a messianic process. The smashing victory in the war, and the occupation of the biblical heartland of Israel, promoted this view. The devastating results of the Yom Kippur war (1973) brought forward the idea of building a massive settlement movement in the territories, and religious Zionist youth played major roles in that emerging power. Settlements were created in order to declare Jewish ownership on the land, and not to allow any government to trade “land for peace.” From the first settlement in Sebastia (1974), all Israeli governments were “coerced” by determined pioneers, motivated by messianic zeal, and almost nothing could stop them. Some
governments opposed the settlers, some embraced them. The fact of the matter is that today, there are about 350,000 Jews living in settlements in the Judea and Samaria. The dream of Greater Israel has turned into hardcore reality. One of the strengths of the book is in the clear portrait of how the settlement movement was created and rose.

In 1990’s the settlers had to face one of their crucial moments. Itzhak Rabin, the head of the Labor Party, was elected as Prime minister in 1992, and a year later he signed a peace agreement with the PLO, based on Land for Peace resolution. The settlers responded with massive demonstrations, and on the margins, even violence. One of the interesting discussions in the book was over the events that brought Yoel Bin Nun into the margins of the settler’s community. During Rabin’s tenure, Yoel Bin-Nun was able to develop direct relationship with the Prime Minister. It was because Bib-Nun had changed his mind. Halevi writes: “The search for political realism and consensus was, for Yoel, a theological imperative. That was the audacity of Yoel’s new theology: political pragmatism as precondition for redemption” (p. 449). Bib-Nun was willing to give up the vision of greater Israel. He came up with a plan to divide the territories into Jewish and Arab cantons: Jews would vote in Israeli elections, Arabs in Jordanian election. Rabin was willing to listen, and Bib-Nun became the only settler who had access to him. However, the situation dramatically changed when on November 4, 1995, Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, an Orthodox Jew and supporter of the settlements. Amir told in his arrest hearing that he was motivated to kill Rabin by a certain rabbinical ruling that sentenced him as a rodef – a pursuer, and according to the Halacha, rodef’s sentence is death.

A few days after the assassination an “Assembly of Self-Reckoning” took place by religious-Zionist rabbis. When Bin-Nun approached the podium, he couldn’t control his emotions and he threatened to give to the police the names of rabbis who supported the assassination. As a result of his speech, the Israeli Police started interrogating rabbis for incitement, and the settler’s community got united behind their rabbis. Yoel Bin-Nun’s life in Ofra became unbearable, he received death threats and he even needed body-guards to escort him for his daily prayers in the synagogue. He had to leave Ofra, and he moved to Kfar Etzion, where the community was less fanatic. The founder of the settlement movement was treated as a rodef, hence excommunicated.

Like Dreamers explore also the decline of the Kibbutz movement. Of four individuals discussed in the book, only one, Avital Geva, actually remained Kibbutznik while all the rest left. The book explains in length the inability of the kibbutz system to reform, faced with economical and ideological challenges. The pro-communist leaning of the kibbutzim caused them a severe blow, when the Soviet Union decided to support the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The kibbutzim also were unable to develop the talents of their members, something that also caused frustrations and eventually many defections.

The best example of these challenges presented in the book is in the story of poet-singer Meir Ariel. Ariel is a well know figure in Israel, arguably one of Israel’s best poet-singers, sometimes he is also being referred as Israel’s “Bob Dylan.” After he died in 1999, the Israeli postal service issued a stamp in his honor.
Ariel was born in Kibbutz Mishmarot in 1942. The kibbutz had a strong socialist lean but Ariel rebelled against all indoctrinations, and his poetry always symbolized a request for normalcy. Ariel used to work during the days in the cotton fields of the kibbutz; at nights he was leading a musical and cultural revolution, when he started playing in a new style (rock), singing about relationships and love rather than national myths.

During the 1980’s Ariel discovered God. During the Lebanon War of 1982, while he was recruited to military reserves, he met a newly observant Chabad Hassid who introduced him to Kaballah. After the war, Ariel’s wife, Tirza, got into an argument with Mishmarot’s leadership over her work placement, and she decided to leave. Meir followed her, and they moved to Tel-Aviv, where his interest in Judaism grew stronger. But what did it mean? Ariel tried to explain: “One day I realized that I can’t circumcise my son and marry [in a religious ceremony] and celebrate holidays without understanding what it’s all about. I believe in God, I believe that the Torah is the true version of existence, to the formation of the world.” Ariel, however, was unwilling to institutionalize his beliefs. He said: “My faith in God is entirely personal and I don’t feel any need to join any camp.” (p. 436)

Is it the irony of history that Ariel turned religious? How could one of the most notable sons of the socialist Kibbutz movement discover God? Actually, Ariel was not alone in his search for spirituality. There is a growing trend in Israeli secular society of curiosity toward the Jewish bookshelf, together with a growing New Age movement. It doesn’t mean that more Israelis are turning Orthodox; it means that many feel emptiness regarding their heritage, and their secular egalitarian Israeli ethos cannot fill their needs. Ariel was one of the harbingers of this trend.

Like Dreamers is an excellent read. It offers interesting narratives that tell the story of modern Israel after 1967. Although it is written in a non-academic style, it offers deep insights into the Israeli society.