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IMAGES OF AMERICAN JEWS IN ISRAELI DRAMA

1932 - 1974

DOUGLAS DAVID WEBER

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
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Referee: Dr. Stanley Nash

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE
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ABSTRACT

Ten representative original Hebrew plays written in Eretz-Israel between 1932 and 1974 are discussed in detail, along with a greater number of plays more briefly treated. Most are not available in English translation; many have not been printed at all or are out of print. Proceeding chronologically by decade, the thesis shows how Israeli playwrights have portrayed America and its Jews in changing ideological and artistic atmospheres. Those images -- almost universally (and predictably), negative -- are the result of two conditions:

1. Israeli playwrights have, until recently, put nationalist considerations before artistry and have thus created stereotypes to serve their polemical ends.
2. Most Israeli playwrights have taken as a tacit assumption that Jewishness is a nationality, rather than -- or even in spite of -- a religion.

After describing in detail how the overall image of American Jews in Israeli drama has evolved over the years, the author by and large leaves it to the reader to decide for himself as to the extent to which these images reflect reality.

לזכרון יעקוב (ינקל) ברודסקי ע"ה,

חותן הידיד.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"American Jewish life stands on the legs of a chicken."¹
 -Bialik

This study deals with an area that has been largely ignored by scholars outside of Israel. Yet of all literary forms, by its very public nature, drama is an excellent gauge of widely held perceptions among the Israeli general public. While the study is not exhaustive (and hopefully, not exhausting!), in that it traces a single theme in contemporary Hebrew drama, rather than being a general survey, it is to the best of the author's knowledge, the first of its kind.

Other than a few rather recent works by a mere handful of scholars, very little at all has been written on Israeli theater for the benefit of English speaking readers. Even in Hebrew, the amount of secondary material is very limited. This study should be useful not only to that small corps who have pioneered in making Israeli drama available to the non-Hebrew reading public, but also to the general reader who is by and large unacquainted with the subject as a whole.

Though seemingly arcane, the study of Israeli drama on the part of diaspora Jewry serves needs which are not merely academic. That which transpires on the stages of Israel often provides a picture of highly charged, emotional attitudes in a clear and coherent fashion. Specifically, Israeli playwrights have painted portraits of America and its Jews quite unlike those created by American Jewish writers of themselves.

It is hoped that by seeing how American Jews are portrayed by Israeli playwrights, the former will better understand both themselves and their brethren in Israel. For, however distorted it has been at times, the image of American Jews on the Israeli stage is not entirely the product of fantasy. At times these plays are a mirror more like those found in fun-houses. At others, the Israeli playwrights display an honesty (some might say chutzpah), which provides the American Jewish reader with a view of himself or herself that may be accurate to the point of pain.

Overall, this study has some very concrete objectives:

1. It makes available synopses and analyses of several important original Hebrew plays which have not been translated into English.
2. It demonstrates how Israelis have seen America and its Jews portrayed in this most public of literary forms during the period under discussion.
3. It seeks to explain the changes in the portrayal of American Jewry on the Israeli stage as an outgrowth of Israeli cultural nationalism, and as the outcome of a view of Jewishness in entirely national rather than religious terms. This is largely dealt with in the concluding chapter.

Rationale.

As has been stated, very little has appeared in English in the field of modern Hebrew drama. On the other hand, Israelis are perhaps the world's most avid theater-goers. It is estimated that total annual ticket sales during the nineteen-sixties was about three million², giving Israel perhaps the highest per capita theater attendance anywhere (each person, regardless of age or background averaging more than one paid

theater attendance annually).

Neither is this a new phenomenon; if anything, paid per capita theater attendance is down since the early days of original Hebrew theater in Israel. In 1949 for example, Yigal Mossinson's *In the Wastes of the Negev*³ ran for an amazing 227 performances by Habima and was seen by 248,007 viewers⁴. Considering that the Jewish population of Israel in that year was approximately 600,000 of whom no more than 511,000 spoke Hebrew as a first or only language⁵, even allowing for the fact that some viewers saw the play more than once, one can state comfortably that almost HALF the total Jewish population saw the play. These statistics are even more astounding as, in 1949 fully 30% of the Jewish population was under the age of 18, and thus were unlikely theater-goers. Additionally, more than half the population had arrived in Israel within two years, many of whom came from areas in which western-style theater was entirely alien. This, as well as several other significant portions of the population, greatly reduced the size of the potential audience, which all the more so makes the success of Mossinson's play almost incredible.

While not every play in Israel has attracted such large audiences, the proportion of theater-goers is astounding. Of the Habima's fifteen most popular productions from 1949 to 1968, for example, the LEAST popular (a translation of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, done in 1954), was seen by a total audience of 103,133. Furthermore, for certain plays produced after 1968, for which total audience statistics are not readily available, there were even longer runs. Ephraim Kishon's 1973 comedy *Ho, Ho, Julia!* had a run of 251 performances by Habima.

For all its enthusiasm however, the Israeli audience is no longer unsophisticated or blindly accepting of the products offered it. It continues to surprise both the critics and those who create the theater. In 1974, when Habima's board of directors begged its creative staff to produce plays which had greater mass appeal and subsequent box-office return, the Israeli public once again proved its unpredictability. It gave a revival of a German Haskalah play, A. Wolfson's *On Frivolity and Hypocrisy*⁶ an enthusiastic reception. It was performed for a record-breaking 319 times.

In sum, the Israeli public has been, even from the period before the creation of the State, disproportionately interested in theater. More so than either poetry or prose, dramatic presentations have had great and measurable impacts upon public opinion, and it is not unusual to find emotional reviews and criticisms of plays even on the front pages of Israeli newspapers. Though the importance of live theater has lessened somewhat in the period since the introduction of television in Israel, one would be hard-pressed to over-estimate the importance of original Hebrew drama in the shaping of Israeli public opinion. This is a basic raison d'etre of this thesis.

In addition, that which is written for the stage, unlike literature meant purely for private consumption, must of necessity be more brief and to the point. A study of novels dealing with this same theme, taking in all the complexities and nuances therein would have to be much more lengthy. Drama has a way of laying out its message in a way not suited to other forms. Plays are more easily summarized and hence, studiable.

Finally, while a study of other fiction would yield more comprehensive results, the majority of Israeli authors have at one time or another also tried their hands at writing plays. If the number of writers of original Hebrew dramas is small, it is not that much smaller than the circle of major Israeli authors as a whole. Some of the same names dominate in both (e.g., A. Meged, A.B. Yehoshua). Even poetry has shared its best with the theater, as Leah Goldberg and N. Alterman and other major Israeli poets have also written for the stage. In sum, this thesis, while confined to drama, should be useful in an understanding of Israeli literature as a whole.

Research Problems.

Some of the reasons modern Hebrew drama has remained terra incognita outside of Israel are:

1. To begin with, the pool of original Hebrew plays is small. As will be discussed in the main body of this study, the number of original Hebrew plays being written each year has been declining, reflecting both a crisis in Israeli dramaturgy as well as the Israeli audience's hunger for foreign fare.
2. In contrast to poetry and prose, very few Israeli plays are published at all. Even the most successful plays on the stage often exist only in manuscript, Xerox or mimeograph form.
3. While the H.U.C.-J.I.R. library in New York, wherein the basic research for this thesis was done, contains every published play listed in Kiryat Sefer, it has few manuscripts. There is no major source of play manuscripts outside of Israel.

4. Even in Israel, there is no central source of play manuscripts. The only way to obtain unpublished plays is either from the libraries of those theaters which maintain them (not all do), or by writing to the playwrights. Unfortunately playwrights, unlike their products, are not immortal -- which all the more complicates matters.

5. Though hundreds of novels, short stories and poems are translated and published each year in English and other European languages, very few plays are translated. It is a rare year that even one play finds its way into English publication, and the entire corpus of published translations is less than twenty. Several of these are mimeograph copies available only in the United States at the Zionist Archives in New York.

6. There are only a few book-length secondary sources in either English or Hebrew. In English there are these:

- a. Mendel Kohansky's *The Hebrew Theatre: Its First Fifty Years*.⁷ Published simultaneously in Hebrew, it reflects what has been recognized as Kohansky's somewhat personal and often idiosyncratic view.⁸ In addition, the book is more about theater than drama; that is, the book pays closer attention to acting and directorial techniques and styles, the politics of theater in Israel, and the changing nature of the Israeli audience, than to the contents of the plays performed. It has, nonetheless, until recently been the basic reference work for both Hebrew and English speaking scholars.

b. Emmanuel Levy's *The Habima-Israel's National Theater, 1917-1977*.⁹ This book is a valuable resource, as it contains statistics and other concrete information available only in Israeli theater archives. It is a revision of his doctoral dissertation done at Columbia University. Notably, Levy was raised in Israel. He too concentrates more on the conditions in which the plays were performed than on their intellectual concerns. To a large extent, the book is more about the audiences and politics of Israeli theater than its plays. He presents many short summaries of plays, several of which are identical to those found in Kohansky, and does not venture much in the way of analysis of their contents.

c. Glenda Abramson's *Modern Hebrew Drama*.¹⁰ This is the most up to date, comprehensive survey IN ANY LANGUAGE of the field as a whole. It covers all aspects of Israeli theater and gives synopses and analyses of most of the important plays, many of which are not described elsewhere. A South African, Abramson provides a perspective quite different from either the Israeli or American critics. Her book, published quite recently, provides the most current and comprehensive bibliography on the subject.

7. Though Israeli scholars have been prolific writers, there are only a few book-length, readily accessible, comprehensive surveys of the field as a whole. By and large, their thoughts have been confined to the pages of Israeli newspapers and periodicals. Among the few book-length works by Israeli critics, most prominent are:

a. Gershon Shaked's *The Historic Hebrew Play in the Period of the Revival (1897-1948)*¹¹. Ever since its publication, this book has been the standard reference for all concerned with the development of modern Hebrew drama. However, the book has as its terminus the year 1948. Shaked, as Israel's most prominent and respected critic, has written dozens of articles on drama after this date, but none of book length.

b. Gideon Ofrat's *The Israeli Drama*¹². This is the most recent, up to date general work on the subject as a whole in Hebrew. Ofrat concentrates on those works which he considers to be pivotal in the development of a specifically Israeli style. The plays which he chooses are discussed in great detail and depth not available elsewhere.

c. Chaim Shoham's *Challenge and Reality in Israeli Drama*¹³. This book is a collection of Shoham's essays on the works of some of the more important Israeli playwrights (Moshe Shamir, Natan Alterman, Aharon Meged, Yigal Mossinson, Nissim Aloni and Yehuda Ha'ezrachi). By focusing on these representative playwrights, Shoham outlines the artistic problems which Israeli playwrights continue to grope with to this day. He concentrated on what he and others have perceived to be the major dilemma confronting Israeli drama; either to present the realities of a specifically Israeli life situation or to address the general problems of human existence in a more universal manner.

While Shoham's book is intended only to address a specific problem in Israeli drama (albeit the central issue), he does provide detailed critical analyses of significant plays by major playwrights which are not elsewhere available. However, the book is not intended as a general overview of Israeli drama, and one must be well acquainted with the subject as a whole beforehand to follow Shoham's arguments.

d. Ezra Zussman's *After the Premier*¹⁴. This recently published collection of essays and reviews is a retrospect of the prominent Israeli critic's long career, from the time of *The Golem* (1925), to the present day. Zussman has been a prolific writer on theater in Israel, yet until now his writings have been confined to the pages of Hebrew newspapers and periodicals. Reflecting the theatrical situation in Israel however, only a small part of these collected reviews deal with original Hebrew plays. While the book provides excellent source material, it too is not intended as a comprehensive general survey of Israeli drama.

8. Though in Hebrew there are a large number of people active in drama criticism, only a handful have found their way into English translation. Until the appearance of Abramson's book, the non-Hebrew reader had to look at Israeli drama through the eyes of the small number of critics who have managed to get their work translated. This is not to say that these critics (Kohansky, Shaked and Gur), who have been most frequently translated into English, have been either parochial, simplistic, or otherwise deficient in their work. On the contrary, they have been critical

of original Hebrew plays to the point of public complaints. Yet, due to this situation, the non-Hebrew reader could easily have the misperception that Israeli critics speak univocally, which they do not.

Abramson's book is the first English source in which the diversity of Israeli drama criticism becomes intelligible to the non-Hebrew reader.

9. There is only one Israeli periodical PRIMARILY concerned with theater, Bamah. Even it does not concentrate exclusively on original Hebrew plays. Rather, it is just as often a forum for discussion on world theater in general. Much of its space is devoted to translations of foreign drama and criticism into Hebrew. Yet it also is a major publisher of original plays which have otherwise remained in manuscript.

The other major Israeli journal dealing exclusively with drama was Te'atron which ceased publication in 1966. Other Israeli literary journals are primarily concerned with prose fiction and poetry, and rarely contain articles on theater. One exception is Orot, which since its inception in 1950 has had a regular column on theater.

10. Finally, there have been only a few master's, rabbinic and doctoral works in the field, some of which are not available in micro-film. Some are monographs on specific playwrights. One, Samuel Levy's *A Critical Study of Habima Plays*,¹⁵ is a particularly useful survey. None have been thematic studies.

Methodology.

Due to the above-mentioned circumstances, the research for this thesis was conducted in the following manner:

1. Every original Hebrew play contained in the Klau Library was examined. This yielded about twenty plays containing either American characters or locales (of the more than 500 plays shelved therein). This

formed the major pool of plays from which a final selection was made.

2. Certain plays referred to in secondary sources, but not available in the Klau Library were sought after in the catalogues of the following libraries: The New York Public Library, The Brooklyn Public Library, The Harvard Library, The New York University Library, and the Zionist Archives. Only one play, *Meged's Goldsmith and Son*, was located in this manner (from the Zionist Archives).

3. Step One having yielded inconclusive results, and Step Two having been almost entirely fruitless, *The National Union Catalogue* for the past forty years was consulted. After many hours of unrewarded research, it became clear that the Klau Library at H.U.C.-J.I.R. in New York contains every original Hebrew play in print, or at least those available in the United States.

4. Two unpublished manuscripts mentioned by Abramson were sought after by personal letters to the playwrights, only one of whom (Bartov), responded. Other playwrights either could not be located or did not respond.

5. Several plays which were not available by any of the above means have, regrettably, had to be discussed from secondary sources.

Organization.

This study proceeds along strictly chronological lines. To do so, certain accommodations had to be made, as some plays written in one decade clearly belong in style and theme to another. Aryeh Chen's *Virgo*, for example, while written in 1970, has more in common with the political and social commentary plays of the sixties rather than with the universalist-expressionist plays of the nineteen-seventies.

Similarly, in that Bernstein's *A Private Secretary* has much the same point and is thematically akin to Meged's *I Like Mike*, it is not grouped with plays of the thirties and forties (when it was originally written), but with those of the fifties (when it was greatly revised and put into printed form). In sum, several liberties have been taken in order to present the material in a coherent fashion.

The background chapter, as well as the general survey material in other chapters is not intended as a history of modern Israeli drama. Rather, it is intended to provide the reader who is not already familiar with the field as a whole with a context in which to understand the ensuing discussions of specific plays. Neither are the few references to other forms of literature meant to make comprehensive statements about Israeli fiction as a whole. Rather, in that Israeli prose fiction and poetry are generally more accessible to and more well known to the non-Hebrew reader, these references are intended merely to provide a sufficient background against which to understand the developing image of American Jewry as portrayed in Israeli drama as a whole.

Terminology.

As several words are consistently used in transliterated Hebrew, they are defined here:

1. Words used in place of the word *Palestine*. As that word is increasingly being used in an anti-Israel polemical sense, others (in Hebrew), are used to avoid those connotations:

- a. Eretz-Israel - *the land of Israel*, that portion of Mandated Palestine which became the State of Israel after 1948.

b. yishuv - *area of settlement*. All places in Eretz-Israel in which Jews resided before 1948.

2. Words used to describe non-Israeli Jews or the places in which they live have been preserved in Hebrew to convey their connotations:

a. golah - *lands of the Exile*, conveying a quite negative sense.

b. t'futzah - *diaspora or dispersion*. This, the more neutral of the two terms, as will be seen, is rarely employed by Israeli authors but is commonly used by non-Israeli Jews.

3. Words used to describe Hebrew plays:

a. *Original Hebrew play* - plays written anywhere by any playwright in the Hebrew language rather than translations or reworkings of foreign language plays.

b. *Israeli play* - plays written in Eretz-Israel, both before and after 1948 by playwrights whom the Israeli public has accepted to be *Israeli*. This becomes problematic, at times, especially in the earlier periods when most of the playwrights were themselves immigrants. At times, these distinctions will be blurred for stylistic reasons.

4. Terms used to describe immigration and emigration:

a. aliyah - *immigration to Eretz-Israel*. While it is clearly wrong in Hebrew to say "he made aliyah," the English convention is here maintained. In Israeli literature it has a positive connotation.

b. yeridah - *emigration from Eretz-Israel*, literally, *going down*. Those who do so are yordim, a term with extremely negative connotations. Olim (the term for those who make aliyah), is simply neutral. The term yeridah is left untranslated especially in places where it is the playwright's intention to caste a negative tinge.

5. Terms left in masculine gender and untranslated for convenience:

a. kibbutznik - here refers to either male or female members of these well-known agricultural communes. The plural for either sex here remains kibbutznikim to avoid confusion on the part of non-Hebrew readers. Moshavnik is similarly treated.

b. chalutz - *a pioneer*. Again, for convenience, this refers to both men and women. The plural is chalutzim. Sometimes chalutziut is used, which means *pioneering* or sometimes *the pioneering spirit*.

Exceptions are made to all of the above when either style demands such a departure or a quotation is taken from an English source in which a different transliteration system is used or if the original Hebrew source was unavailable.

Selection of Plays for this Thesis.

The choice of plays examined herein is somewhat arbitrary, having to do with their availability. Yet, from the pool of potential plays to be discussed, certain philosophical choices were made:

1. Certain plays by important Israeli playwrights, such as Yosef Bar Josef's *Difficult People*,¹⁶ Leah Goldberg's *The Lady of the Castle*,¹⁷ and Ada Amichai-Yeivin's *Impure Until Evening*,¹⁸ while not ostensibly about American Jews, would have been included had this study been a doctoral dissertation. These three, as well as other Israeli plays, provide probing looks at the effects of the golah upon the Jewish psyche. Moreover, they deal with Jews from opulent countries, and in several ways, the images therein are quite like those of American Jews in the plays which are examined in this thesis. They were excluded from detailed analysis here as a result of the thesis' limited scope.

2. Other plays were either included or excluded in order to provide a more balanced and chronologically even sample. This proved to be more difficult than was first imagined. The original intent of this study was to concentrate on works written after 1948, with an emphasis on more recent plays. However, it was discovered that the pool of plays in which Americans figure prominently is rather large at the older end of the spectrum and rather scanty at the more recent end. As will become clear in the main body of this study, this is quite logical, as the direction of Israeli plays in the past two decades has been away from the thinly veiled polemics of an earlier age and more towards a specifically Israeli version of universalism.

Thus, certain early plays were eliminated. I.D. Berkowitz, for example, wrote extensively for the stages of the yishuv, where two of his plays were presented by the prestigious Habima. Several others of his plays bear directly on the topic at hand, but were not included here in order to provide a more even chronological distribution. His *In Distant Lands*¹⁹, written in 1928, takes place in New York and is a scathing picture of American Jewish life, of which he had been a part. Another (labeled "A Joke in One Act"), *Who Could Predict, Who Could Know?*²⁰, published the same year, similarly pokes fun at American Jewish life. Yet, as will be seen, the nature of his criticism is quite different than the mainstream of original Hebrew plays of the time (he is more interested in revealing the artificial religiosity and hypocrisy of American Jews, while the tendenz of other playwrights of the era was colored primarily by socialism. For both reasons, his plays were not included here.

Similarly, plays were not selected based upon their success with an audience. For some (e.g., *Min Ha'metzar* and *A Private Secretary*), it could not readily be determined whether or not they had been performed. Yet, the former is by far the most important playwright of his generation (Aharon Ashman), and the latter (as will be seen in Chapter IV), is representative of an entire genre of plays otherwise not represented. Similar criteria were applied to the selection of plays in the last two chapters.

In sum, were this a strictly scientific analysis of the contents of Israeli drama and its portrayals of American Jews, there would be many more plays from an even earlier era than are dealt with here. Instead,

a selection was made in order to provide an understanding of how an image has changed over time and in changing political and ideological circumstances.

Intellectual Biases: A More Personal Word.

While most people who write about drama are proponents of particular theories of theater, I do not (at least wittingly), adhere to any one such view. I am neither schooled in nor enamoured of any of the current schools of drama criticism. Hence, I have by and large avoided such arcane and obfuscatory labels as "structuralism", "deconstruction", et.al.²¹ Neither have I sought to attach the names of drama theorists with whose works I am only marginally familiar. In sum, if and when my comments are reminiscent of any of these critics or schools of criticism and no assignation is made, it is the result of ignorance rather than plagiarism.

The following study then, is the result of a rather eclectic approach. It is neither literary criticism, social science nor religious hermeneutics; hopefully, it is a little of all three. It is intended as a generalist's approach to a field in which the participants are accustomed to talking only with each other. If I can be allowed the chutzpah to paraphrase an old rabbinic dictum, this study has been written, not in the specialized and obfuscatory language employed by those who deal with literature on a professional basis, and for whom much of this thesis would be superfluous, but "in the language of people, for the sake of people."

Finally, this study is not meant as an apology for American Jewry. Though much of what Israeli playwrights have had to say about America and its Jews may be gross exaggeration, I have left it for the reader to decide for himself whether or not, and to what extent, the stereotypes they perpetrate are true. I have tried to remain as objective as possible, yet there will be times when my own biases are apparent. These are, it seems, inevitable.

It has now been more than a year since I first encountered Bialik's pungent observation. Whether Israeli drama is, in Gershon Shaked's words "a mirror up to nature," or more like the mirrors one finds in a fun-house, I have yet to decide. I shall leave it to the concluding chapter of this study to take a brief look at our legs.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I:

1. ביאליק, ח.נ. כל כתבי ביאליק. דביר, ירושלים, תשכ"א
2. Kohansky, M. "Theatre." Article in Encyclopaedia Judaica.
3. Hebrew title: בערבות הנגב
4. This and all other attendance figures for Habima plays taken from E. Levy, The Habima-Israel's National Theater, 1917-1977. Appendix 2, pp. 293-309.
5. Bachi, Roberto. "Israel, State of (Population)." Article in Encyclopaedia Judaica, Vol. 9, pp. 472-492. This is the major source for all population and demography statistics cited in this study.
6. Hebrew title: קלות דעת וצביעות
7. Kohansky, Mendel. The Hebrew Theatre: Its First Fifty Years. KTAV, New York, 1969.
8. See for example, Israel Gur's critique in his continuing column in Bama at the time of Kohansky's book's publication. Bama #39-42. (1969-70).
9. See Bibliography for complete entry.
10. See Bibliography for complete entry. Note: whenever Abramson is mentioned in this thesis, the reference is to this book and not to any other of her articles.
11. See Bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew. Unavailable in translation.
12. See Bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew. On verso of title page is The Israel Drama. Title changed here to conform to American usage.
13. See Bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew. Referred to (erroneously) in certain English sources as "Imagination and Reality in Israeli Drama."
14. See Bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew.
15. See Bibliography for complete entry.

16. Hebrew title: אנשים קשים
17. Hebrew title: בעלת הארמון
18. Hebrew title: סמא עד הערב
19. Hebrew title: בארצות הרחוקות
20. Hebrew title: מי נביא וידע?
21. For a detailed and entertaining look at the extent to which literary criticism has destroyed all pleasure in reading and the arcane and obfuscatory jargon it has created, see Frederick Crews, "Criticism Without Constraint" in Commentary, 73:1. (January, 1982). pp. 65-71.

CHAPTER II

Background: Major Trends in the Development of the Original Hebrew Play in Eretz-Israel to the Year 1948.

"It is hard to present plays based on the new Hebrew life in Eretz-Israel because our new life is not yet crystallized."
-Bialik¹

While other literary forms have long and glorious histories, works written for the stage are relative late-comers to the Jewish cultural scene. Yet the pioneers of the original Hebrew play in the new State of Israel did not begin with a tabula rasa. As Shaked states, "Just as the State did not appear of itself but grew out of the yishuv, so contemporary (Israeli) drama was not created with the Declaration of Independence."² As Shaked contends, it was only natural that the rough and often primitive efforts of the yishuv's playwrights, devoid of craft and artistry as they were, would in time evolve into more subtle and theatrically convincing forms. In his view, Israeli drama after 1948 has its roots firmly planted in the soil of the yishuv and its development from that time on is the inevitable outcome of directions first followed in the pre-Statehood period.³

Abramson, on the other hand, sees the situation quite differently:

The great dividing line in the history of Hebrew drama was the establishment of the State. The War of Liberation constituted a turning point in Israel's cultural life which, for the first time, rested with the country's youth who had previously had little share or participation in creative artistic work. Now that the past and all its ugly connotations was being slowly expunged, a new generation of artists had to take the place of those who were identified with obsolete cultural forms and themes.⁴

Though some see in the development of post-Independence Israeli drama the continuation of a previously ongoing evolution while others perceive in it traces of a special creatio ex nihilo, all critics agree that in form and message alike plays written after 1948 represent a major break from the immediate past. When themes present in pre-1948 drama reappear in those written after that date, they do so only in much altered form. By all accounts, after 1948 original Hebrew plays in Israel bore decreasing resemblance to the works of the pioneers in the yishuv.

Reasons for the dramatic shift in the direction of original Hebrew plays after 1948 can be seen in a summary analysis of the overall corpus of the yishuv's theatrical output and, secondarily, in the socio-political and artistic atmosphere in which the early playwrights worked. Upon consideration of these factors, it becomes clear that, at least for the pre-1948 period, it would be unlikely if not impossible to find a realistic portrayal of an American Jew.

This is so as the plays of that era were marked by the absence of any plausible individuals at all, not to mention a believable portrait of "the ideal Jew" or - even less likely - the Jew who stubbornly insisted upon remaining in the golah. Yet it is only within the context of the overall theatrical output of the yishuv that both coeval and later images of American Jewry can be understood. Consequently, the remainder of this chapter consists of a brief survey of the plays of the yishuv. Only in Chapter III will two plays be examined in detail, for it is out of a unique theatrical background that eventually the image of American Jews in Israeli drama emerges.

Artistic Atmosphere of the Yishuv.

From its infancy, the original Hebrew play in the yishuv was heavily influenced in its development by non-artistic considerations. Beginning with the most primitive efforts at realistic drama, and continuing even to the present day, theater as art for its own sake has travelled a difficult and often circuitous path towards Israeli public acceptance. Though other forms of literature have similarly been called upon to serve nationalist needs, none have been enlisted as often or as vigorously as have been works written for the stage.

While playwrights in most western democracies were, by and large, free to follow their own artistic inclinations, free to experiment with the creative possibilities of the theater, the aspiring Hebrew playwrights of the yishuv were not similarly at liberty. Instead, drama in Eretz-Israel, until quite late in its short history, was seen by both its critics and the general public as more of a vehicle for political and social statement than as a medium of purely artistic or personal expression. In general, and with very rare exceptions, the plays of the yishuv were designed by their creators and accepted by their audience as educational tools, motivators of social and political progress, and definers of national identity rather than as devices by which to examine the more general and universal human condition. Though it is also true that many plays of this period were intended strictly as light entertainments, the grand majority of original Hebrew plays of the period were designed to serve, in however humble a manner, the overriding cause of Jewish nationalism.

As Abramson states⁵, it was only natural that theater took on the role of agent for social and political change. After all, more than either poetry or prose, which are primarily intended for private consumption, drama is by its very nature a public event. Brought to life by live actors, the words of playwrights have an emotional force and impact which is difficult to match in other media.

It was only natural then, that in the twenty critical years before the creation of the State the yishuv's playwrights created their own brand of social realism⁶. Though even at their zenith these plays did not reach the heights of plot implausibility and one-dimensional characterization as did - to take the extreme examples - Soviet plays of the nineteen-fifties or Chinese plays of the "Cultural Revolution", a large number of them were written as polemics.

In addition, the playwrights of the yishuv were beset by even more basic problems. Not only were they trying to forge a national identity on the stage when the future was very much in doubt, they were also working in a medium which had little precedent in Hebrew literature. As Abramson states:

The greatest problem concerning the evaluation of Hebrew drama in Israel today is its lack of a continuous past. After 1948 it emerged suddenly as an art form to be reckoned with but because of its youth it has no tradition from which to evolve certain necessary critical standards?

Abramson, it must be stated, is very much in the minority opinion in a field dominated by Israelis who have striven to show that the modern Israeli play has a long and quite fine ancestry. Modern Israeli drama has been portrayed (depending on the critic), as the descendant of the Yiddish theaters of Europe and the United States, the medieval

Purim-schpiel, or even, in the extreme view, proto-dramatic sections of the Bible.⁸ Shaked sees the modern Hebrew play's roots extending deeply into the German Haskalah.⁹ Yet all admit that little original work of lasting significance was bequeathed to the playwrights of the yishuv. Though these plays had demonstrated that Hebrew as a living language could be used on stage, the dramaturgy of the Haskalah was stylistically sterile and rather deadly as entertainment. As Abramson summarizes:

Hascallah Hebrew drama was profound, philosophical, linguistically innovating and above all intensely serious. Yiddish drama of the same time might not have been any of these things but it was undoubtedly theatre. Yet it functioned only as an expression of a confined and restricted environment and when the need for it had passed it gradually became a theatrical curiosity and has remained so to the present day.¹⁰

In this environment, one of the primary goals of the yishuv's playwrights was to demonstrate in a more convincing manner that Hebrew had attained enough flexibility and capacity for nuance to be used as a serious medium for theater. At this the yishuv's dramatists were successful.

Equally important, the aspiring Hebrew playwrights were writing for an audience which for the most part was unacquainted with western theater and its conventions. While many of the members of the first waves of aliyah (especially at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth), were western Europeans and "enlightened" eastern Europeans, later waves brought with them fewer and fewer Jews for whom the conventions of modern western drama were familiar. The proportion of immigrants for whom Hebrew as a spoken language was unfamiliar also increased.¹¹

Thus, as much as he was creating a new art form out of a rather meager inheritance, the Israeli playwright of the thirties and forties was writing for an audience unfamiliar with dramaturgical traditions. In essence, especially before 1948, the audience for which Hebrew plays were written had first and foremost to be educated and made accustomed to a world previously unknown to it.

A third factor in the development of Hebrew drama in the yishuv was financial. Although every play that managed to be produced was eagerly awaited, the people in the audience were by and large unable to pay admission sufficient to cover the cost of productions. The one permanent troupe, Habima (which itself had emigrated from Moscow), was for a time split apart mainly for financial reasons, the major part of the troupe having left the country for an extended tour of Europe and the United States. Until the founding of the State, when government subsidies were made available, the various acting companies lived on a hand-to-mouth basis.¹² Limited budgets sometimes forced playwrights to rewrite scripts originally containing many characters so that all the actors, their costumes and props could fit into a single automobile. For theaters other than those which received State support, this situation has continued to exist.¹³

In addition, before the creation of the State, no theater had a permanent hall in which to work. Most plays were presented on tours of small villages and kibbutzim, and thus props and scenery had to be kept to a minimum.

Tied to all the above was a general lack of professional theater tradition in the yishuv. Just as the new playwrights had yet to evolve

a more natural style of their own, so too their plays were performed by actors whose experience had been confined to the melodramas of the Yiddish theater. When new directors appeared in the country who had been exposed to more naturalistic techniques prevalent in the west, they were often frustrated by the lack of available actors similarly¹⁴ trained.

Lastly, before the creation of the State, there was the inevitable problem of censorship. While there had been a few topical plays presented in the Turkish period, with the British Mandate and the promise of the Balfour Declaration, plays were increasingly set in the contemporary period. Public performances had to be approved by the British authorities, and it was the exception that a play critical of the British government evaded the censor's eye. For the most part, the yishuv's playwrights sought to avoid open confrontations with the authorities and instead, contented themselves with veiling their sarcasms in oblique historical references.¹⁵

In all, given the conditions in which original plays were performed in the yishuv, it is not remarkable that little of lasting value has come down to us from that era. Yet, these efforts became the tradition against which later Israeli playwrights reacted, and form the background, however simplistic, against which the image of American Jews is projected.

Styles and Themes of Original Hebrew Plays in the Yishuv to 1948.

While the number of original Hebrew plays written in the yishuv is impressive, only a small percentage were produced. Those that did find their way into production were eagerly received, and the more significant among them have been described by one or more of the available

secondary sources. Though each of the major critics classifies the plays somewhat differently, they can be said to fall roughly into three major categories. The following section offers a capsule review of these genres.

Light Entertainments.

A large number of the plays produced in the yishuv were meant primarily as light theatrical entertainments. Representative of these is Ashman's *Michal, Daughter of Saul* (Habima 1941)¹⁶. Kohansky accounts for the fact that it was the first original Hebrew play to achieve wide popularity with the yishuv's audience solely by virtue of the playwright's technique:

Ashman knew how to build a plot which would hold the audience's attention, and in retelling the biblical tale he made no attempt to derive his¹⁷ torical, psychological or philosophical lessons.

This was all the more remarkable as, "The characterization was strictly black-and-white, with no shading, and the poetry was of the nineteenth-century, pseudo-biblical type."¹⁸

Many short comedies were produced all through the period by smaller theaters such as the Kumkum (Teapot), and its successor Matateh (The Broom). Several poked fun at the British authorities. As Kohansky states:

Though the programmes underwent severe censorship, the arrows were sharp and met their targets, and contributed greatly to keeping up the morale of the people. The theatre's influence went far beyond its actual public, for the jokes and, even more, the songs had wide currency.¹⁹

Most of these plays however were more a series of sketches or musical revues than drama. The smaller theaters provided an outlet

of raw political protest unavailable elsewhere. The productions were the yishuv's vaudeville but with a political vengeance. Most of them, however, involved a great deal of improvisation in the *comedia dell'arte* tradition, and almost none were printed. By the nineteen-forties, this genre had receded far into the background, not to be revived again in quite the same manner.

Historical and Ostensibly Jewish Plays.

By far the largest number of plays written in the yishuv centered on historical events. Some, like Ashman's *Michal*, were meant to be mere retellings of well-known parts of Jewish history. Others, however, served as springboards for polemics.

Two such plays are Bystryzky Agmon's *Shabbatai Zevi*²⁰ (Ohel 1936), and his *Jerusalem and Rome*²¹ (Habima 1941). Both plays are quite representative of the times as the historical personages are meant to be readily identifiable symbols of various, easily categorized, Jewish types. In *Shabbatai Zevi*, the false messiah who chose conversion to Islam over death is presented in a favorable light, in contradistinction to the more common, historical Jew who all too often has foolishly persisted in his faith.²² A variation on this same theme is presented in *Jerusalem and Rome*. This time, the overly passive and accommodating sage Yochanan ben Zaki is contrasted with the militant Yochanan of Giskala, who advocates a fight unto death against Rome. In the end, it is neither who emerges as justified. Instead, it is Josephus (the aloof historian), able to rise above Jewish history who is proposed as a model. Like the great majority of such plays common to the yishuv in both plays:

...the characters were more spokesmen for ideas than living people, and the plot served more to create situations for dialogue than to express its own inner development.²³

Inasmuch as he tried to extract a moral lesson from these historical events, Bystryzky was in the minority. More numerous were plays that were simple, innocuous retellings of biblical stories (e.g. *The Flood*, by H. Berger, performed by Habima in 1925 and again in 1946). Others were based on familiar folk-tales from Europe (e.g. S. Anski's *The Dybbuk*, which opened in 1922 and ran for three straight years). Many more were adaptations of novels written both in Hebrew and other languages, particularly in Yiddish. The trend towards the production of foreign, rather than original Hebrew plays, which began in the 1930's has not only continued, but intensified to this day. It has been a major source of consternation to Israeli playwrights and critics alike.²⁴ Even so, in every period it has been the original Hebrew play, however infrequently produced in contrast to translations of foreign plays, that has been the center of the critical and public eye.

While none of the plays written before 1948 have proven to be of lasting significance, at the times in which they were performed they were of great value. They dealt with historical themes which enlightened the less literate sectors of the public to some very basic historical facts. Some other plays, such as Mattityahu Shoham's *Balaam* (1925), and *You Shall Not Make Iron Gods* (1937), went beyond a mere retelling of biblical events. In each, the protagonists and antagonists become symbolic of various aspects of Jewish culture. In the former, Moses is portrayed as the force of light in a world dominated by Balaam

who personifies darkness. In the latter, Gog, personifying Aryanism and Nazism, is pitted against Abraham who represents Judaism. Of Shoham's plays Abramson writes:

Through the power of his poetry Shoham was able to endow language with a dimension of its own and this is precisely why his plays failed as theatre; because his literary, idiosyncratic diction is completely unsuited to the stage.²⁵

Other pre-Independence Hebrew plays were theatrical failures for similar reasons, though very few reached the poetic heights of Shoham. Though the genre of historically based plays has not disappeared from the Israeli dramatic scene, after 1948 it was transformed into a more subtle form.

Topical Plays Set in the Yishuv.

Though less numerous than plays of the above category, the most important legacy of the pre-Independence theater in Eretz-Israel is the corpus of plays set in the yishuv. The majority of this small but important body of plays are set in the near past on the kibbutzim of the yishuv. The best representative of these plays is, beyond doubt, A. Ashman's, *This Soil*²⁶ (Habima 1942). With the exception of *The Dybbuk*, it was by far the most popular play of the pre-Independence era, with a record of 213 performances before being revived in the nineteen-sixties.²⁷

The play, as were many others, was a paean to Zionism and in particular, to chalutzit. Also typical of the period, it was filled with stock characters, including:

...the idealist who is also a man of strength born of unquestioning faith; the heroic woman at his side; the doubting intellectual; the man of little faith; the sinister profiteer²⁸

On several counts *This Soil* represents a major turning point in the development of original Hebrew plays in the yishuv. The action is set in Yarkia, a kibbutz newly established in the midst of the swamps. As a malaria epidemic worsens, a physician implores the chalutzim to abandon the settlement. After having endured the cruelties of both the Turkish authorities and the neighboring Arabs, some settlers begin to leave, unable to brave the rigors of the epidemic. They are turned back by the valiant words of the play's stock pioneer hero, whose refrain is: "Here, on this soil!" In the epilogue, the audience learns that the swamps were eventually drained and the dreaded disease beaten back, and that Yarkia is now (1942), a thriving fifty-year old settlement.

Most critics raved about the production, as the following excerpt indicates:

The entire repertoire of the Hebrew theatre, beginning with *The Dybbuk*, is one great paean to the golah...perhaps this was necessary with the Diaspora in a process of decline. But theatre and fiction must not deal exclusively with this subject. There is room for the description of a sinking world, and also room for a description of a rising world. How much the more so could Zionist propaganda gain had it been able to use artistic instruments!...Bring us the romanticism of Eretz-Israel, and the Zionist movement will rise!²⁹

Other critics were similarly enthusiastic, as was the public. As E. Levy reports, the concluding speech of the play's hero invariably brought cheers from the audience.³⁰ So great was the need for romanticization of the harsh life in the yishuv that critics were willing to overlook the play's shortcomings. One wrote:

The play is so honest, so naive and so charged with emotion, the general atmosphere is so attractive, that one is reluctant to approach it with the unpleasant yardsticks of criticism and analyse its details.³¹

Ashman's play, however artistically flawed, was a milestone in the development of a truly indigenous Israeli theater. First, although its characters were larger-than-life, the audience was able to identify with them emotionally. Instead of being remote historical figures, they bore resemblance to real people found in the life of the yishuv. Second, the setting was familiar. *This Soil* dealt with events similar to those still happening in the country. Earlier plays had been set in Eretz-Israel of the Turkish and even the British Mandate periods, but they had largely been light, sarcastic comedies and had never attempted any real dramatic pathos. *This Soil* elicited both cheers and tears.

The need for such plays had already been recognized but had remained unfilled. Other attempts at realistic portrayals of life in the yishuv had been made (e.g. Zevi Shatz' *Batya* in 1940 and Yeshua Bar-Yosef's *In the Alleys of Jerusalem*³² in 1948, both produced by Ohel). But these had been such utterly transparent media for unrelenting polemics that even the unsophisticated audiences of the time would not tolerate them.³³

After the rousing success of *This Soil*, Ashman himself tried his hand at the older genre. *The Annunciation*³⁴ (Habima 1946) represents both a step forward and a step backward at the same time. The play is a melodrama dealing in a superficial and sentimental manner with the significance of giving birth to Jewish children in Eretz-Israel after

the holocaust. While it ushered in a new genre (of holocaust plays), stylistically it was regressive. Neither the critics nor the public would any longer accept a series of propaganda speeches so thinly veiled in the cloak of theater, and the play closed after only 25 performances.

Ashman however, in *This Soil*, stands as singularly the most important Israeli playwright of the pre-Independence era. Not only had he created a genre of plays directly centered in the life of the yishuv, he had created characters which were at least minimally believable and with whom the audiences of the time could empathize. That it was not until 1942 that such a play would be written shows indeed the poverty of the dramatic scenery in the yishuv.

It also helps explain why, in the rare instances in which American Jews are portrayed in plays of the era from 1932-1948, those images are so devoid of plausibility. For, in a period in which playwrights were creating what was essentially a new medium for an audience unacquainted with dramaturgical traditions, it is not surprising to find that the few images of Jews from the golah, (specifically, from the flesh-pots of America), are rather black-and-white.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II:

1. Quoted in E. Levy, The Habima p. 132.
2. Shaked, G. "A Mirror Up to Nature" p. 41.
3. Ibid. See also Shaked's "First Person Plural", Jerusalem Quarterly Winter, 1982.
4. Abramson, Modern Hebrew Drama p. 49.
5. This is a major premise of her book and of this thesis; the nature of drama is public and it is therefore, a good gauge of prevailing opinion.
6. "Social" realism in contradistinction to ostensibly "socialist realism." Others more commonly refer to this genre as "realistic" or "reportage" drama, but as is clear, these plays represented idealized rather than existing realities.
7. Abramson, op.cit. p. 9.
8. See, for example, the extreme nationalist chauvanism of Gershony's view in The Hebrew Theatre, introduction.
9. Shaked, G. article in Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Drama."
10. Abramson, op.cit. p. 27.
11. Statistics are taken from almanacs and art., "Israel" in Enc. Jud.
12. See E. Levy, op.cit. p.155.
13. A similar situation is described in a personal letter to the author from Hanoach Bartov of 10/81 regarding Go Home, Jonathan! See Chapter V for details. Used by permission.
14. A major point in Kohansky's The Hebrew Theatre. Gershony however, takes a contrasting view, as does Gur. The latter ascribes much of the actors' problems in this period to personality conflicts with various directors, particularly Stanislavsky and his followers.
15. Kohansky, op.cit. pp. 107-115.
16. Hebrew title: **פיכל בת שאול**
17. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 143.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid. p. 108.
20. Hebrew title: **סבתאי צבי**
21. Hebrew title: **ירושלים ורומי**
22. See Gershon Shalom's article in Enc. Jud. "Shabbetai Z'vi"; the overwhelming bulk of Jewish tradition on Sabbateanism is negative.
23. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 142.
24. A major thesis of E. Levy's book. Abramson calls the tendency, "The Problem of Imitation", pp. 142 ff.
25. Abramson, op.cit. p. 26.
26. Hebrew title: **הארץ הזאת** Also translated as "This Earth".

27. It ran for 46 performances at Habima in 1967.
28. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 143.
29. Baruch Krupnick, Haboker critic. Quoted in Kohansky p. 145.
30. E. Levy, op.cit. p. 131.
31. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 145.
32. Hebrew title: בנתכור ירושלים
33. Let the reader judge for himself or herself; see E. Levy's Appendix 2. Beginning in the 1940's, while the yishuv's playwrights created propaganda plays, its audiences simply refused to attend. Most of the shows closed after only a few performances, as audiences flocked to see translations of European and American plays.
34. Hebrew title: הבסורה

CHAPTER III

The American Jew as Buffoonish Embodiment of the Golah's Decadence:
Two Socialist-Realist Reportage Plays of the Pre-Independence Period.

"Exile is not only a calamity and a disaster. Rather, in essence it is the sin of both our forebears and ourselves. It is the transgression of generations before us as well as our own. It is both punishment and guilt at the same time."

- Brenner¹

This chapter provides a look at two plays of the pre-1948 era in which American Jews play prominent roles. In the overall context of original Hebrew drama written in Eretz-Israel, the two plays are mere footnotes. But in an examination of how the Israeli playwright has portrayed the American Jew, they are more than mere theatrical curiosities.

They are the first to illustrate on stage an attitude towards the tefutzah prevalent in Hebrew polemics and other prose forms of the era. Moreover, we see in them American Jewry singled out from among all the Jews of the golah as representative of all that has been wrong with Jewish culture before the rise of modern Zionism. In their banality, the American Jewish characters in the two plays display a decadence coupled with buffoonery that sets the tone for later characterizations of American Jews by Israeli playwrights. These plays show a seething disdain for everything that reeks of the golah, and in both cases the American Jew (especially as rich tourist in a land of hardship), serves

as the ultimate symbol of that damned place. At the same time, these plays show that, for all his bourgeois decadence, the American Jew has a lighter and even somewhat human side. Hope even exists that, once exposed to the Zionist vision, this pathetic creature can shed the "punishment and guilt" of the golah and join in the nationalist struggle.

Written more than a decade apart, the two plays are nonetheless cast from the same mold. The two playwrights, Aharon Ashman² and Asher Beilin³, were both born in Russia before the turn of the century (the latter in 1881 and the former in 1896). Both were active Zionists before emigrating to Eretz-Israel. Ashman served in a Jewish self-defense unit in the Ukraine during the Petliura pogroms after World War I. Beilin worked as Shalom Aleichem's secretary from 1901-05 and moved to London the next year, where he worked as a journalist until his aliyah in 1933. Ashman had arrived in Israel as a young man in 1921, and only afterward started his literary career. Though Beilin was Ashman's senior by some fifteen years, it is not surprising that the same intellectual stream runs through the work of both playwrights.

Ashman's *Min Hametzar*⁴

Published in 1932, *Min Hametzar* (In Distress), was Ashman's first creation for the stage. The play takes its name from Psalm 118:5, "In distress I called on God...". The verse continues..."He answered me with liberation." It could not be ascertained whether or not the play has ever been performed.⁵ Unrefined as dramaturgy, the play has all the elements that mark the genre of socialist-realist reportage plays of the thirties and forties. Unlike his later triumph (*This Soil*),

Ashman's *Min Ha-metzar* is a comedy of sorts. Yet the same issues are addressed in both.

Typical of the genre, *Min Ha-metzar* involves a large cast of poorly fleshed-out characters, who serve mainly as spokesmen for ideas. They include seven kibbutznikim; Yechiah (a Yemenite bread vendor), Tirtzah (a Yemenite chambermaid), Mrs. Yarkoni (a bourgeois city-dweller), Mister Stevens ("an underwear merchant from Philadelphia"), Nettie Stevens (his daughter), and Mister Baron (a journalist). Among the kibbutznikim are Yehudah (the kibbutz Secretary and the leading male), and Ellah (the "heroic woman at his side"), the others (Zevi, Benny, Menasseh, Uriel and Avramel), are minor characters who represent various types of kibbutznikim.

Synopsis:

Act I opens with Yehudah delivering a speech on the importance of establishing the new kibbutz. The tone of the play is established immediately:

Yehudah: We work to clear the path for the waves and waves of new immigrants who will follow!

Voices: We have come to build up the land and to be rebuilt by it!

The socialist ideology of the play is also set as Zevi proclaims: "Let's do a horah...a real proletarian horah!"

In the midst of the dance, Yehudah's "rich uncle from Philadelphia" and his daughter show up. They have been searching the yishuv for him, but haven't succeeded, as Yehudah has Hebraized his name and has purposefully avoided them. He has been in Eretz-Israel for six years. The plot digresses for Ashman to make an ideological point, as the workers argue over the need for experts. While Yechiah criticizes the

horah as being un-Jewish, the Stevenses complain: (p.11):

Nettie: I'm exhausted.

Mr. Stevens: Streams of sweat...you see? The chalutzim's horah is no easy thing. Work, I tell you, it's real work!

Meanwhile, the Stevenses and Mr. Baron (the stock doubting intellectual), discuss the manners of both the Yemenites and the chalutzim (p.14):

Baron: How quaint! It's hard to believe we're one people.

Stevens: On the contrary. They (the Yemenites), are the real Jews, the ten lost tribes.

Stevens speaks Hebrew punctuated by "you see" and "dat'll do". He is uncomfortable using the language of the chalutzim, preferring *rabotai* to *chaverai*, but soon he is persuaded to adopt their custom and, with a shrug of the shoulders he says: "Are not all Jews friends? Especially in the land of their fathers!"

The plot as such further digresses (pps.15-17), as the kibbutznikim argue over sex roles and Marxist theory. Yehudah, the American pragmatist, ends their bickering with a speech that concludes (p.17): "You turn every little discussion into a debate on principles...we must stop this and see the whole picture."

It is then that the first real event of the play occurs. The communal hut burns down, adding to the previous problems of disease, unemployment, lack of food and general poverty. The members fortify their spirits by telling stories of earlier hardships overcome. In spite of the tragedy, the chalutzim will not give up, as Uriel says, "(How can we)...when the whole Jewish people is faced with destruction?" (p.24). Act I ends with a song, using a variation on the familiar words, "Why, why, why? Why have you (God) forsaken us?"

Act II takes place, nearby the settlement, at a small hotel owned by Mrs. Yarkoni in which the Stevenses are staying. A few comic scenes take place in which Nettie tries with limited success to make her fat, lazy father do some calisthenics. Due to a further economic downturn, Ellah has had to join Tirtzah as a chambermaid in the petit-bourgeois Mrs. Yarkoni's hotel, where she receives only room and board. Benny too, recovering from malaria, is penniless and looking for work. Stevens, in an act of noblesse oblige, offers Benny the ultimate luxury -- a pack of American cigarettes -- which is refused out of proletarian pride. Meanwhile, Mr. Baron has become enamoured of Ellah, whom he tries to convince to leave the commune. She refuses, echoing Yehudah's words (p. 37); "You must see the whole vision."

As Act II progresses, things get more desperate: Menasseh has had enough of socialist theory -- he will become a shoe-shiner with a full stomach instead of a starving but righteous chalutz. Yehudah, always the ideologue, remains steadfast in his faith in the future of the kibbutz. In contrast, Mr. Stevens hopes that Yehudah will "come to his senses" and return with him to Philadelphia where he will inherit the vast underwear empire. Yehudah resists all offers of assistance from his uncle who is confident that as living conditions get even worse, the youth will realize the folly of his work with the commune. The following typifies much of the stale dialogue in Act II: (p. 43):

Ellah: Yehudah, it's no longer possible. We can no longer bear the load. Even I have no more strength. It's a living hell here, a hell with no end...

Yehudah: My dear...in but a short time things will improve...one must remain strong...

Ellah: I can't stay any longer. I'm weak...

Yehudah: We have sanctified our lives to the movement! Every movement requires sacrifice!

In desperation, Yehudah gives in and asks his nouveau riche uncle for a loan. In the midst of the emergency, Stevens has the audacity and insensitivity jokingly to demand collateral, which Yehudah does not, under the circumstances, think very funny. Yehudah tells his uncle that he does not understand the Zionist vision, to which Stevens replies: (p.46)

I know, you're a Zionist. I too am a Zionist--for many years I have been one! Don't think otherwise! I'm very busy in these matters: meetings, conventions, speeches. But--working with cement, in filthy clothes like these..this sort of life? It's possible, for a year, maybe two, like a stint in the army. Let it rest there. But for my own brother's son to be a mere cement worker all the days of his life?--No! I cannot permit it.

The Act ends with Ellah on the verge of leaving the country as Mr. Baron's personal secretary. Surrounded not only by the impending failure of the commune, the desertion of many of its members, and the hardships of life in the depression-ridden yishuv, Yehudah is left alone on stage, quoting from Psalm 37, "I have been young, now I am old, yet I have not seen a righteous man utterly abandoned."⁷

Act III takes place some months later. Somehow, between the Acts, the difficulties have been somewhat overcome, and the chalutzim prepare to open the new cement factory (it is uncertain where they received the resources to do so, though it seems to be a loan from Mr. Stevens). As the members learn how to operate the equipment, some light comedy ensues, as they make all sorts of mistakes. As they inaugurate the cement mixer, each member is called up to deposit buckets of sand and cement

in a parody of the traditional rituals for the reading of the Torah (p.54). As they all join in the joyful work, Yehudah gives another speech in which he describes a dream: God himself has given Yehudah a vision of a successful future for the kibbutz. The chalutzim are so moved that they join in the following, which could have been lifted directly from many a typical Soviet play of the era: (p.58):

Yehudah: Through work all Israel is one!
 All: Through work!
 Yehudah: Through work Israel is made fit!⁸
 All: Through work!
 Yehudah: Through work Israel becomes heroic!
 All: Through work!
 Yehudah: Through work Israel is purified!
 All: Through work!

After this heroic scene, we rejoin the Stevenses on the tennis court, where they are to meet Ellah and Mr. Baron. Just as they are about to play, Ellah hears the glorious sound of the cement mixer, and, her faith restored, decides to return to the kibbutz. Mr. Baron scoffs, while Stevens, glad to escape the torture of exercise, takes out his camera saying "Imagine, tennis! At my age, at my weight!" He and Nettie go over to the cement plant TO TAKE PICTURES OF WORK.

They are met at the gate by Yehudah, who points to a sign which states *STRANGERS FORBIDDEN TO ENTER*. Stevens is enraged (p.65):

What's this you say? WE are strangers? I, I myself am a founder! I helped to establish all this. (He takes from his pockets coins from 1905, 1911 and 1920)...I am the President of Temple B'nai Zion in Philadelphia, the gabai of Ansh'e Zedek...

He continues:

You want it like this, fine. Ascend into the land and conquer it! But you are forgetting that YOU ARE ONLY OUR MESSENGERS, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WHOLE JEWISH PEOPLE...show some respect towards those who support you.

Yehudah replies to this with a diatribe on the Zionist work ethic; checkbook Zionism is no Zionism at all. Nettie and Mr. Stevens are now thoroughly convinced that Yehudah has gone mad. They are rebuked by the brave chalutzim in no uncertain terms (p.67): "Just because you have attended a lot of chicken dinners does not mean you understand our lives!" Ellah adds that, had either of the Stevenses ever had to demean themselves by working as chambermaids, they might better be in a position to judge them.

The play ends as Ellah bids farewell to Mr. Baron (p.68):

...It's not only for my own good, Mr. Baron, but yours. Perhaps one clear morning in Paris, in Berlin, in London or New York, you will suddenly sense the certainty, the necessity of casting your lot among us here...we who rebuild the land with blood, tears, and yes, even dances.

Uriel, similar to the refrain of *This Soil* a decade later, adds: "Here, on these scaffolds!" At the conclusion of the play all the "good" characters join in a rousing dance, singing a song titled *Ode to Work*. The "bad" characters (the Stevenses, Mr. Baron and Mrs. Yarkoni), representing respectively galut, effete intellectualism and petit-bourgeois, nouveau riche life-styles, look on passively from the sides of the stage

An analysis of *Min Ha'metzar* is found after the following section.

Asher Beilin's *Banim L'Gvulam*⁹

Though Beilin had a long literary career, *Banim L'Gvulam* (*The Return of the Sons*), was his only play. He had written a novel in 1928 *Al B'Limah* (*On Nothing*), and had published reminiscences of both Brenner and Shalom Aleichem with whom he had collaborated. *Banim L'Gvulam* was produced by Habima in December, 1944 and ran for a

respectable sixty-nine performances.¹⁰ In spite of its generally negative reception by the critics, the audience once again demonstrated its preference for reportage plays set in the yishuv, which accounts for the play's moderate success.¹¹ It was the first original Hebrew play presented by Habima after the overwhelmingly successful *This Soil* two years previous, and in both style and theme it bears great similarity to both that play and *Min Hametzar*.

Again, as is typical of the genre, *Banim L'Gvulam* involves a large cast of rather one-dimensional characters, including: Jack Silver - a rich American tourist; Bellah - his wife; Rose - (later known as Vardah, their daughter); Yosef Shlomi - a new immigrant, trained as a physician, but working as a waiter; Chaïm Gershman - a cigarette vendor; Zev Gershman - his son, and kibbutz representative; Zechariah - a Yemenite shoe-shine boy.

A hotel owner, four old Eastern European Rabbis, a Rebbitzen, her grandson and the usual assortment of kibbutznikim complete the cast. The play is liberally laced with musical interludes and songs, and is labeled *A Comedy in Three Acts*.

Synopsis:

Act I opens as the Silvers boorishly complain to Yosef and the hotel owner both about the oppressive heat and lack of manners of the yishuv's residents. All three are surly and abusive to the waiter until they discover that in reality he is a trained physician, whereupon they treat him with deference. Bellah continually says, "I'm suffocating from the heat" and thus they plan on accompanying their friends, the Taylors, to Lebanon, where the climate is "more humane". Besides, she says (p.8), "we've seen everything worth seeing here".

They are in for a shock, however, when Rose, their college-aged daughter, informs them that she has no intention of leaving. Despite the heat, she feels at home in the yishuv and gives a long speech on the discomfort she has felt in the golah, which concludes (p.10): "Only here, in Israel, can I forget I'm a Jew just for a moment. Here I am just a regular person." She declines to accompany her parents to dinner at the Taylors' hotel at which, as usual, she will be expected to gossip with the women while the men play cards and smoke cigars.

As the level of service in the hotel gets progressively worse, the Silvers complain to the hotel owner. He agrees with them that the help is quite chutzpadik but says (p.14), "What can one do? If I reprimand them they go on strike."

Rose meanwhile is busy with her plans to join a kibbutz, of which Zev is the representative. He questions her motives, saying that perhaps, like many Americans before her, she is doing so on a lark. He has met many Americans before who talk about the "days when they were chalutzim". She replies:

...My parents have spent their entire lives for a single purpose, getting rich. Through their single-mindedness they have reached their goal. Now I want to use the same stubbornness for a more noble goal.

Zev responds with a speech on the rigors of kibbutz life, to which she answers (p.22):

...Gee, that's great...how wonderful, to start from the beginning and to create something out of nothing.

At Zev's suggestion, Rose changes her name to Vardah, and with Jack's blessing (but not Bellah's), prepares to leave for the new settlement. Jack reassures Bellah that Rose's mind will change once she has to face the realities of life on the new settlement.

Back at the hotel, Jack recognizes Chaim Gershman, the cigarette vendor, as being a landsman from the same town in Poland. In Dovinovkeh Jack had been Ya'kov Zilberman. Gershman tells Jack about the pogroms that had occurred in the time since he left Poland for America; everything is different. Most of the people they both knew are dead, and even the cemetery has been destroyed. Jack, in a gesture of noblesse oblige, tries to offer Gershman financial help, but he refuses. He offers to bring him to Philadelphia where SINCE HE CAN READ HEBREW AND LEAD PRAYERS, he would have no problem getting a job as a "Reverend," so minimal is Jewish life there.

Gershman tells Jack that being a cigarette vendor, a shoe-shiner or even a garbage collector in Eretz-Israel is "cleaner" work than any to be found in the golah, which stinks of materialism. Deep-down, Jack admits, he would like to settle in Israel, but his wife would never allow it, saying (p.35): "She sees here only desolation, deserts and enormous mountains." Gershman's reply foreshadows the last Act: "The day will come when the both of you will repent."

Jack continues to try to give charity to Gershman, and when the latter refuses, he tricks him into a game of cards. He manipulates the game so that eventually, Gershman wins a few dollars. But Jack has done so in a condescending manner and Gershman proclaims (p.41): "You are as full of dollars as a pig is of filth!"

Jack is quite moved both by that which he hears from Gershman and the struggle for existence which he sees around him. Instantly shedding his artificial bourgeois sense of decorum, he joins the shoe-shine boy and a lowly bagel-vendor in a horah. He will stay in the country at all costs, even if it means having to shine shoes for a living. Act

I ends with Bellah in a state of disbelief. She says (p.42): "Oy Vey, Jack! Have you lost your mind?...what a come-down, what a disgrace!"

Act II takes place in the new settlement of Ein Segev, with the various chalutzim talking about the same problems as were central in *Min Hametzar* and *This Soil*; disease, starvation, and lack of money have taken their toll. Added to this is a lack of water. Vardah (Rose), has been a hard worker but insists on keeping some of the accouterments of her past alive. In spite of the severe water shortage, she insists on washing her clothes everyday, unlike the other chalutzim who wear the same dirty clothes from the communal pile from day to day. She continues to plant flowers when water is desperately needed for vegetables. Zalman, the kibbutz's ideologue, chides her for her bourgeois manners, even adding (p.54): "It's a pity that you didn't bring any ¹²shwartzers with you to wait on you!"

Comedy ensues as the chalutzim see a carload of tourists arrive. They flee to work, as no one wants to be saddled with the horrible chore of showing them around. Tourists, it seems, always want to do the same things, to have their picture taken with a cow, or with a shovel in hand. While Vardah is out fetching water from a very distant well, it is discovered that the tourists are none other than Jack and Bellah Silver. It takes a while for this to be revealed, as Rose has also changed her surname to its Hebrew equivalent, Caspi.

The Silvers are shocked at the living conditions. Bellah complains (pps.56-57), "The flies are eating me alive...what an awful place, what a living hell!" Jack, though well intentioned, asks of the drought-stricken kibbutznikim if they have any cold beer to sell! They are

offered water, but there aren't any cups, highlighting the primitive conditions. A chalutz says:

We have no cups. We have but one communal ladle.
Even Weitzman, when he was here, drank from it.

That which was good enough for Weitzman however, does not suffice for Mrs. Silver, who would rather die of thirst than drink from a communal ladle. Jack is somewhat more sympathetic. He earnestly asks the chalutzim how they spend their days, but they respond with sarcasm, toying with his ignorance as they describe a life of luxuriant frivolity.

Bellah, on the other hand, has no interest in the matter. She is at Ein Segev to save her daughter from disaster. Money is no object; she is willing to pay whatever price the chalutzim ask if they will send Vardah away. Zev replies (p.66):

...You talk as if you are speaking to gangsters!
Money! Silver! Gold! That's the only language
you seem to understand. That will get you no-
where here, Mrs. Caspi.

As they wait for Vardah to return, Jack converses with the kibbutznikim, including Zev (Gershman's son), and Yosef (the former waiter who now reappears as the kibbutz's doctor). He, though not his wife, is now convinced that what Vardah is doing is right; Jack will try to influence his wife to join him in making aliyah.

Just as Vardah returns, a new disaster strikes, (the children's dormitory has caught fire) and there is little water to put it out.

Act III takes place some years later. Four old Rabbis are davening mincha nearby the now successful kibbutz. Afterwards, they lament the folly of their lives; had they been better able to foresee the future, they would have come to Israel years ago. Their children are

scattered all over the globe. One of them says that his son is in "Califonia," and when another asks where that is he replies (p.71), that it's "in New York somewhere." Brenner's words are put directly in the old Rabbi's mouth as he says of the dispersion of his family and the pain it has caused him, "I myself am the guilty one."

Yet their love of the new land is tempered by their dislike of the inhabitants' lack of religious observance. They "go about with uncovered heads like "shagitizim," and when one of them prevails upon his grandson to join him in prayer, it is like pulling teeth.

True to Gershman's prophecy in Act I, Bellah now reappears. She and Jack have now thoroughly repented. She talks amusingly of her decadent ways, saying (p.81): "Yes, that was when we were still the 'Lords of East Broadway'. Do you remember? Back then we thought of you as a bunch of gypsies who stole our daughter." She and Jack, having now lived in the city (a half-way house for Diaspora Jews), now want to take the ultimate step by joining the kibbutz.

A great deal is now recounted in a short space. Zev is dying, as the result of years of deprivation and malaria. Vardah has a two year old son whom she bore with a husband who died of malaria before the boy was born. Jack, on the other hand, who throughout Acts I and II had always been complaining of minor ailments (he coughed a great deal due to his cigar-smoking and had liver problems due to excess drinking), is now in excellent health. Truly, he has "been rebuilt by the land".

A comic and ironic scene takes place in which Gershman tries to assist Jack; the tables are now turned. Jack, however, takes Gershman's chiding in stride, for he has repented. He has even changed his tastes--he no longer plays cards to pass away many idle hours, and has

desisted from his former vices.

The play ends with a celebration at which, as usual, there will be a plethora of speeches made in which all the hardships in building the now prosperous settlement are recounted. Two of the kibbutznikim discuss their elders' verbosity (p.91):

Amnon: My God! It's as if they were re-enacting the Akedah on Mt. Moriah!...

Daliah: There's no wonder to their excess.
After two thousand years of galut
there's quite a bit to say.

The speech-making comes to a climax as Vardah delivers a long and moving address on the hardships that now lie ahead. That very night, she will lead a small contingent of settlers--babe in her arms and rifle on her shoulders--into a new era. She now steps into the shoes of the older generation and assumes the reins of leadership. Stirred to exaltation by her speech, everyone joins in a wild horah and sings:

Every stone,
Every clump of earth,
You are my native land,
We'll sow and plant
And sing unto you, "spring forth!"

Oh! Each stone is mine,
Each clump of soil-
You are my native land,
Yet others will plant along with us,
When your children return to their borders.

The play, in true socialist-realist style, concludes with all the characters joining in the song's refrain: "The sons will return, yes, they shall return, the sons shall return to their borders." A link with the past is maintained as one of the Rabbis, in a short epilogue, looks on and recites from Psalm 62, "God is my strength and my deliverance; from my place I shall not be moved."

Analysis of the Two Plays

Though *Banim L'Gvulam* is a light comedy compared with the more heavy-handed, cynical, serious and acerbic *Min Ha'metzar*, they share common themes. Both plays present the golah as a disaster for the Jewish people; it is a stinking flesh-pot that kills the Jewish psyche. Life in the city (even in Eretz-Israel), while a step above, is similarly not suited for those who would strive to create a true and meaningful Jewish life. Only among the hardship-ridden chalutzim, where life is lived at its limits, can the true Zionist vision be fulfilled and Jewish dignity be attained: "By work Israel is much pure."

This indeed is not only the tenor of these two plays, but of many written in the thirties and forties. In more subtle format it is also a common theme in plays written long after this time. In a doctoral dissertation¹³ Samuel Levy found eight dominant themes in plays presented by Habima from 1948-68. Five of these themes are present in the two plays we are discussing:

- 1: Abandonment of the kibbutz and country are national disasters.
- 2: Unity is strength.
- 3: Collective life is superior to city life.
- 4: Duty is of higher priority than personal freedom or comfort.
- 5: The coming of the messiah necessitates the destruction of Jewish history.

Though some of these themes are not fully fleshed out in the two plays discussed in this chapter, they are clearly foreshadowed. In both,

the ideologues of the kibbutzim implore their comrades to brave the present hardships; to stop their bickering; at all costs not to retreat to the illusory comforts of the city; and to put aside for the moment the hope for personal gratification in favor of working for the collective good. The last of Levy's themes (present in later Habima plays), is only hinted at in these two plays.

In *Min Hametzar*, the American tourists and the journalist are representative of the passivity and decadence of the golah. They are unproductive parasites and do no real work, either taking pictures of it (Mr. Stevens), or writing about it (Mr. Baron). They are fat and lazy and full of vice. Though Nettie seems to have some sympathy for the chalutzim, by and large she, like her father, has eaten too deeply from the flesh-pots of the golah to rid herself of its poison. *Min Hametzar's* American characters are portrayed as tragic, even pathetic creatures whom the march of Jewish history has passed by. They, along with Mrs. Yarkoni, who as a petty capitalist continues to exploit her own people, clearly belong to a past that needs to be annihilated.

Banim L'Gvulam however presents a lighter side. Though the Silvers are incredibly one-dimensional, they are more human and somewhat more convincing than the Stevenses of Ashman's play. They, in the best of Jewish tradition, are afforded the chance to perform tshuvah, to repent of their evil ways. Unlike the Stevenses, Beilin's American characters are in the end able "to see the whole vision." Shedding their Diaspora mannerisms, they free themselves and are able to step in from the side-lines of Jewish history to join the mainstream. Jack Silver, very much like Ashman's Mr. Stevens (whose first name we never learn), had also been a checkbook, chicken-dinner Zionist. He however, drawn

in by his daughter's idealism, is now prepared to accept the new order, the "correct world-view." He changes not only his external appearance but even his name. The truth embodied in chalutzit is simply too strong even for his stubbornness to deny.

In addition to these themes, another is present in both plays which will resurface in later portrayals of American Jews in Israeli plays. That is, while the older generation of American Jews seems almost utterly lost to the Jewish future, hope springs eternal that the idealism of youth will save American Jewry's younger generation. *Min Hametzar's* hero is Yehudah, the young American emigrant, and in *Banim L'Gvulam* it is their teenage daughter who causes the decadent Silvers to see the light. It is in fact surprising that the buffoonish Jack and Bellah are in the end swayed to the "correct world-view." Through most of the play they were seen as beyond the realm of salvageability.

A small difference between the characters of Yehudah and Rose might be attributed to the fact that Ashman's play was his first and is artistically rather immature compared to Beilin's (which was written when he was a considerably older man). Beilin's Rose/Vardah somehow has more depth to her; though she is still rather one-dimensional, he tries to paint in some detail which demarcates her as specifically American. Unlike Yehudah, there is more than one facet to this Zionist jewel; this she demonstrates by maintaining some of her American characteristics even when faced by a severe drought on the new settlement. About Ashman's Yehudah, on the other hand, we know very little. He, in youthful idealism, has simply rejected the values of the bourgeois fathers. We see no internal conflict within him at all, while Beilin's Rose/Vardah at least shows some signs of reconciling her past with the future which she has chosen for herself.

Summary and Conclusions

In considering these two plays, several factors need to be recalled. First, as outlined in Chapter II, the lack of a continuous past coupled with the difficult artistic conditions in which the two playwrights worked militated against the development of any real pathos in them. That these plays do not represent drama at its best is clear from the beginning, but that they served a specific need at the times at which they were written is also true. As E. Levy summarizes:

The Return of the Sons was a reportage propaganda play with stock characters, lacking the sincerity and naiveté of *This Soil*. All critics spoke unfavorably of the play, especially of its obvious propaganda. It seemed to many of them that the Zionist organizations themselves were delivering speeches to the audience. The public, however, proved again that it liked to see realistic, reportage plays..¹⁴

The critical disdain for *Ban'im* could just have easily been applied to *Min Hametzar*. Though the public at the time loved this type of play:

...The major problem with the Habima's Israeli plays (of this era) was the very fact that they were close to reality, and that once this reality changed--and the reality of Israeli society changed (and changed) rapidly--these plays quickly became dated!¹⁵

Second, the political views of the two playwrights (also typical of the times), were of party-line Socialism which has since slipped from vogue in Israel. The similarities between the two plays (especially Beilin's) and certain Soviet plays of the same era are impos-

sible to ignore. If it seems unimaginable that Ellah (in Ashman's play) could be enchanted by the siren sound of a cement mixer, it is hardly less so than events in certain Soviet plays of the same era. In *Tempo* (1929) by the Soviet writer Pogodin,¹⁶ it is shown how the Stalingrad tractor plant was constructed in spite of laggards and saboteurs. In that play, "pathos" is guilt as an American engineer learns to admire the new Soviet methods. Another play, Kaverin's¹⁷ *The Taming of Mr. Robinson, or Paradise Lost*, (1933) -- written shortly after the Soviet Writer's Union made socialist-realism the only acceptable style of theater in that country -- is amazingly similar to the two Israeli plays. In it, an Englishman visits the USSR with his family, but leaves them to find happiness working for the new state. The highlight of the comedy is Mr. Robinson's dialogue, which takes place as he overindulges his taste for alcohol. All the while a Humpty-Dumpty figure stands on stage, symbolizing the comical Robinson family. The two Israeli plays share with Soviet plays of the era a common setting, in the former the kibbutz, in the latter the kolkhoz (collective farm). Like many Soviet plays of the thirties, the collective farm is a harsh environment which, nonetheless, holds an almost magical attraction for bourgeois foreigners. Once exposed to the new world-view, their outer shells fall away as the real persons inside affirm their intrinsic validity.

This being the case, it is unfair and unnecessary to point out the obvious gaps between reality and the image of American Jews in the two plays discussed in this chapter. Surely, we are not to believe that every American Jew of the era was as wealthy as these characters. Whatever reality we find in either the Silvers or the Stevenses is almost

incidental, for THEY, as well as the other characters in the play, ARE NOT INTENDED TO BE REAL PEOPLE. They are caricatures in a living political cartoon and are painted as unmistakable symbols. In these two cases, the cartoonists have a double burden with which to saddle their figures. Not only must they validate the nationalism of the playwrights but their specifically Socialist views as well. Whereas in most western drama critical moments revolve around the resolution of emotional and internal conflicts, Socialist Realism dismisses the entire aesthetic world-view as misleading. That which another writer says of Soviet plays is entirely applicable to *Banim L'Gvulam*, *Min Hametzar* and several other Israeli plays of the era:

...Since Marxism predicates the inevitability of communism, good and evil are stereotyped. The results are preordained when history predicates a happy ending. The socialist hero must triumph, if not for a moment, then eventually. Tragedy is then diluted, if possible at all. Thus, socialist realism in turn stifled the artist by imposing a formula, and resulted in a long series of mediocre melodramas!⁸

In melodrama, there are but two types of character, good and bad. In the two Israeli plays, American Jews, to the extent that they maintain the marks of the golah, can only be the embodiment of everything wrong with previous Jewish history. The one and only path to redemption is for them to become Israelis, and hence, good. In both plays the American characters are displayed along with other Jews of the golah as examples of the havoc created by the Exile. Beilin's four old Rabbis daven furtively, representing the extent to which Jewish religion has both enslaved the Jew and sapped his vital energy. Ashman's Mr. Baron shows how effete intellectualism has had an emasculating influence, and in both, the hotel owners are the incarnation of small-time

Capitalist mercantilism which has squashed the Jewish spirit. The Diaspora Jews embody passivity; the Israelis are active.

In retrospect, the yishuv's acceptance of such plays is not remarkable. What may be surprising is that many elements in them -- including the image of American Jewry as both buffoonish and decadent with little redeeming qualities -- have persisted, as will be seen in later chapters.

1. Quoted in R. Alcalay, Words of the Wise. Jerusalem, 1970 p.139.
2. Biographical information on these two playwrights from articles, "Ashman,Aharon" and "Beilin,Asher" in Encyclopaedia Judaica.
3. Same as Item 2 above.
4. Hebrew title: מן המצר
5. Neither the printed edition or any secondary source gives such information. Neither is it listed in Habima's or in Camerai's repertory.
6. Rabotai means "gentlemen", chaverai means "friends" or here, "my comrades". Quite clearly, Mr. Stevens does not feel like a "comrade" of the workers.
7. My own translation.
8. The Hebrew is כטר
9. Hebrew: בנים לגבולם
10. E. Levy, The Habima, Appendix 2.
11. Ibid. pp. 131-132. "Moderate success" is used advisedly; many more plays had much longer runs.
12. He uses the Hebrew kushim, which is rather neutral and simply means, "negroes" or "blacks", but the intent of the sentence is clearly derogatory, thus the Yiddish word.
13. Levy, S. A Critical Study of Habima Plays....See Bibliography for full entry.
14. E. Levy, op.cit. p. 132.
15. Ibid. p. 133.
16. Moore and Perry, Twentieth Century Russian Literature, p. 77.
17. Ibid. p. 76.
18. Lewis, The Contemporary Theatre, p. 126.

CHAPTER IV

American Jewish Youth as a Cure for Israeli Societal Ills:Social Realist Comedies of the 1950's.

"Each generation has its own needs, each its own truths."
 -Achad Ha'am¹

With the Creation of the State in 1948 the direction of original Israeli plays took a dramatic turn. Though biblical, historical and holocaust plays continued to be written, the trend towards portraying real-life situations in Israel, begun in the previous decade, attained increasing dominance. Unlike the romanticization of yishuv life found in earlier works, the new plays offered a high degree of realism; having even a newsreel quality to them. That the quest for realism, at almost any cost, set a stumbling block in the way of the original Israeli play's artistic development has been recognized by everyone who has written in the field.² Yet it is also the supposed realism of the plays of this era (1948-60) that provides a yardstick by which one can gauge the accuracy of Israeli playwrights' image of American Jewry.

This chapter, after a brief overview of Israeli plays from 1948-60, examines two plays which are not only typical of the social realism of the era, but in which American Jews play central roles.

Major Developments in Israeli Drama, 1948-60.

For several years after the creation of the State, the major topic of Israeli plays was, quite naturally, the War of Liberation. Most important of these plays were:

1. Moshe Shamir's *He Walked in the Fields*.³ The play was produced for the first time on May 31, 1948 (just two weeks after independence was proclaimed), by Habima at the Mograbi Theater in Tel-Aviv, where the actors' voices were often drowned out by the sound of gunfire outside.⁴ It was revived in 1956 by the Cameri (when it had particular relevance, as the Sinai Campaign had just erupted), and again in 1966. In 1967 the original producer, Joseph Milo, made it into a film.

He Walked in the Fields is the quintessential Palmach play. Its hero is...

an idealised character; unsentimental to the point almost of cruelty, rigidly just, dedicated, capable, unostentatious and possessing, with all this, a lively sense of humour.⁵

The action takes place on a kibbutz where members hear that the British have set a trap for a group of "illegal" immigrants. Someone must go on a suicide mission to save them. As commander of his unit, the play's hero has no choice but to heed the call of duty. When he is killed, his widow is convinced not to commit suicide but to bear the child she carries, as he will be one of the first-born citizens of the new State.

2. *In the Wastes of the Negev*,⁶ (Habima 1949), by Yigal Mossinson. The plot here is reminiscent of Ashman's *This Soil*: this time, instead of malaria, Egyptian soldiers threaten to overrun a kibbutz. Again, the chalutz hero ignores the advice of the so-called experts (in this case,

the Army), and remains steadfast in his determination to hold onto the settlement at all costs. The other chalutzim are ultimately swayed to his opinion and, though suffering many casualties, the Egyptians are turned back.

3. *They Will Arrive Tomorrow*,⁷ (Cameri 1950), by Nathan Shaham. More dramatic than the others, a group of soldiers discovers that the hill on which they sit is sown with twelve landmines. Each soldier that dies increases the survival probabilities of the others. It is a play without heroes; instead, the two officers discourse on the moral dilemma in which they find themselves.

Because of the immediacy of their subjects, all three plays met with tremendous public acceptance. The normally sedate audiences were often sent into an emotional frenzy by each. (Mossinson's play had its problems however, as members of the Army saw it as a direct attack upon them.)⁸

Critics, however, saw tremendous deficiencies in each of these plays. Though they applauded some aspects of each, overall, even at the time they were produced, there was a general critical lament at the level of drama in the new State. In retrospect, the common fault of the three plays was that:

They present incidents in a vacuum. They express a period but fail to analyse it. They remain examples of dramatic reportage, a static description of reality in the most familiar of terms, a continued pandering to a public that wanted everything devoted to them, a kind of parading of their achievements.⁹

As the dust of the War of Liberation settled, a new set of problems became fair game for Israeli playwrights. The new situation in turn created two new genres of plays, both of which persisted throughout the

fifties and into the sixties.

The first of these types was in essence, a revival of an earlier form. A. Meged's *On the Way to Eilat*¹⁰ (Habima 1951) glorified a team of water-drillers in the Negev. As Kohansky notes:

The play was uncomfortably reminiscent of the socialist-realist Soviet plays, the hero being in love with his water drill (he spoke of the piece of machinery as if it were a living creature with oil circulating in its veins, taking fuel for food!¹¹

Another of Meged's stories was adapted for the stage by the Cameri in 1953. *The Sea and a House*¹² quite pedantically tells the story of a band of fishermen who brave the dangers of a stormy sea and return with a large catch. Again, there is no real individual hero in the play, rather it is the kibbutz as a collective that emerges in that role.¹³

Though there continued to be other plays written along these lines, by the mid-fifties the Israeli public was no longer quite willing to sit through an evening of unabashed odes to Zionism, unadorned by the subtleties and nuance that are the core of real drama. Neither were they willing to tolerate that which Ezra Zussman saw in *On the Way to Eilat*:

A major fault of the play, common to most of our plays, is the poor dialogue. The language is purely naturalistic. The desire to present reality and real people results in copying everyday language, which lacks colour and value of its own. This blurs the characters instead of individualizing them.¹⁴

In answer to both critical and public tastes, Israeli playwrights created a somewhat new genre of plays dealing topically but more artfully with contemporary problems of the newly independent State. These included ideological as well as more concrete problems. Some, such as Hanoch Bartov's *Each Had Six Wings*¹⁵ (Habima 1958) and Yoseph Bar-Joseph's

¹⁶
Tura (Cameri 1963), dealt with the problems of immigrants as did Ephraim Kishon's *Black on White*¹⁷ (Habima 1956) in a humorous manner. In the latter, all the actors are dressed as mice, some white (Ashkenazim) and some black (Sephardim).

Other plays dealt with more general problems, including the general sense of disillusionment following the miraculous victory in the War of Liberation. Shamir's *The House of Hillel*¹⁸ (Habima 1950) dealt not only with the problem of the absorption of immigrants but with the wrecklessness with which original Zionist principles were being compromised. The major controversy is whether or not the kibbutz should use hired labor; the old-timers oppose this as a violation of the holiest of principles, even if it means the crops will rot in the fields.

More common were the plays which criticized the evolving lifestyles in Israel's cities. Shoham's *Call Me Siomka*¹⁹ (Cameri 1950) portrays a high official who has squandered a large sum of public money. In order to avoid a scandal, his comrades close ranks. In the end, Siomka's conscience gets the better of him and he refuses to go along with his fellow bureaucrats' scheme. Shoham's play ends on an optimistic note, and one gets the feeling that, "...the future of the nation is secure. In the midst of corruption there will always be a tight knot of those who keep the old flame alive."²⁰

Shoham's optimism is not always found in other plays of the period. Corruption, pettiness, loss of the older generation's ideals, and lust after worldly gain are all around, crouching like demons and ready at all times to strangle the infant State. Coupled to these are all the external problems which Israel faces. In the hands of other playwrights

these elements spell disaster. Radical steps need to be taken if Israel is to survive for long. This may mean a return to the original ideology of the fathers as in *Stormy Night*²¹, by Shamir (Habima 1954). It may even, in the extreme case -- Mossinson's *Throw Him to the Dogs*²² (Habima 1959) -- mean the limitation of freedom of the press²³.

In all, however, most of the topical plays of the nineteen-fifties did not seek to penetrate far below the superficial problems of the new society. While playwrights in western countries were experimenting in the theater of the absurd, with Brechtian epic drama and Pirandello's questioning of the nature of drama to begin with, Israeli playwrights were caught up in a unique brand of social (no longer purely socialist) realism. The problem with this, as Abramson states was:

The playwright and his viewers were always in accord, there was agreement on all sides and therefore no more to be said.²⁴

She also notes that a major problem (which persisted through the early nineteen-sixties), was that most of the plays were adaptations of novels. The stories had originally been conceived as narratives and the playwrights (usually the same persons), lacked the dramaturgical skills to translate their original work into creations for the stage that had much life to them.

It is against this background that we now turn to two quite typical plays of the nineteen-fifties, Aharon Meged's *I Like Mike*, and Mordecai Bernstein's *A Private Secretary*. When superficiality and lack of true pathos appear in them, it ought to be recalled that in fact these were the hallmarks of Israeli plays of the period. That American Jews are treated more charitably in them than in plays before 1948 is both a mark of the playwrights' orientations (neither one was a party-line Socialist)

as well as the greater success which Israeli playwrights attained in this era in their quest for realism.

Aharon Meged's *I Like Mike*²⁵

The Meged family immigrated from Poland in 1926, when Aharon was six years old. His first collection of short stories, *Sea Winds* (from one of which *The Sea and a House* was adapted), was published in 1950. Meged drew from his experiences growing up on Kibbutz Sedot Yam.²⁶ He is a well-known Israeli novelist, whose most ambitious work has been *Living on the Dead*.²⁷ In which he describes in unflattering terms modern Israeli society. Both in his prose and plays he also makes the accusation that the present generation fails to live up to the high ideals of the State's founders. Unlike his other important plays (*Hannah Szenesh*, *Genesis*, and *Hedva and D*), *I Like Mike* is a light comedy.

I Like Mike was first produced by Habima in September, 1956. It was also presented in New York²⁸ (at the Herzalia Institute) the following year, though there is no extant translation. It was also made into a feature film in the late nineteen-sixties.²⁹ The play was generally met with mixed criticism, but great popular acclaim, as it received an impressive 127 performances by Habima. It is considered an important play by all of the secondary sources for its use of language and its all-too-realistic fun-poking at Israeli society.

The play's title is diglottic (that is, English transliterated into Hebrew characters), and is a word play on the American campaign slogan of the era. *I Like Mike* is a comedy constructed along almost Molierian lines; unlikely coincidences, idiosyncracies of speech and mannerisms, and utterly transparent characters and motivations are stitched together

to achieve Meged's polemical ends. Like Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, Meged's play is a parody of petit bourgeois urban life and misses no opportunity to show its smallness and lack of meaning.

Quite in line with other plays both before and after, *I Like Mike* is an extended humorous sermon on several nationalist themes, as noted by S. Levy.³⁰ Leaving the country in order to indulge one's material desires is a betrayal to the country and its people. Middle class city life is filled with pettiness and is inferior to the pristine life on the kibbutzim, where the true Israeli patriots live. True Zionists will abandon their egotistical desires for career and social status for the sake of the nation.

Synopsis.

The play's three Acts all take place in the living room of the Arieli family in present day (1956) Tel-Aviv. All the action takes place within a three week period. The major characters are: Benjamin Arieli, a junior clerk in a government office; Yaffa Arieli, his wife, and mother of Tamara, age 18; Tzip, their younger daughter, age 12; Malka, a friend of the family; Micha, a Sgt. Major in the I.D.F. and Tamara's boyfriend of many years; Mike Abrahams, a young American tourist (the title role).

A number of minor characters (friends of the family, Benjamin's fellow office workers, two Military Policemen, a policeman and a postman) complete the cast.

Act I opens with a comic, impending sense of doom: Tamara has reached draft age and must report for induction very soon if she is not quickly married. She and the rest of the family are already resigned to this sad fact of Israeli life when Mrs. Arieli, determined to

prevent what she calls an "utter waste of time" at all costs, happily hears of the presence of the eligible young Mr. Mike Abrahams from Texas. With no regard for Micha -- (What sort of future is there in the army?" she says) -- Yaffa devises a plot to marry Tamara off to the naive but wealthy American tourist before she must present herself to the draft-board. Tamara first rejects her mother's scheme, but then realizes that a stint in the army would jeopardize the singing career she seeks, and she goes along with it.

Benjamin, who at first saw the scheme as only another of his wife's petty intrigues, now realizes the true implications of the hoped-for marriage; not only can Tamara avoid the draft, but the young "Mister Mike" (as they call him), could take them all with him back to Texas. There (which Benjamin believes to be "not far from New York") they could all live in the lap of unimaginable American luxury, no longer enslaved to the hardships of Israeli life.

The Arielis begin a desperate struggle to "improve" their English, which is hardly English at all. Nervously they spend their time conjugating English verbs, neither ever catching on to the patterns. As Yaffa and Tamara pursue "Mr. Mike" and essay to dispose of Micha as quickly as possible, Tzip is equally determined to undermine the family's plan. In contrast to her parents' aping of American speech and manners, Tzip speaks a Hebrew liberally laced with quotations from the Prophets.

Ironically, in Act I the Arielis have convinced Mike that in his short stay in Israel he has not seen enough. Mike has complained about the lack of manners, the pushing and shoving, and the dirt in Israel's cities. He takes Benjamin's advice, and sets out for a tour of the Negev, where he remains throughout Act II.

Though he is the title character, Mike appears only infrequently on stage. He has come to see the land which he has learned about in Sunday School in Texas, and to which his father sends a great deal of money. ("Go see what they're doing with my money" his father has told him.) Unlike other tourists, however, he wishes to see not just the same old sites but "the living Israel." A comic hero, upon being introduced to the Arielis he says in his best Sunday School Hebrew (p.28):

אני...אני שמח מאד על הצינוס הזה להיות בבית של משפחה בישראל,
 בסבילי זה first-hand information כמו שאומרים...

Act I ends as the Arielis (except for Tzip), squeal with glee. Mike is not only from a wealthy family but one that has yichus (his father is "a long-time Zionist" and a friend of a certain famous Rabbi Miller in Texas). As Mike show some mild affection for Tamara, the family is ecstatic, thinking they have bagged a patsy.

In Act II however, complications arise from an unexpected source. Mike has already spoken of his general disdain for urban life, be it in New York or Tel-Aviv. He likes the wide open spaces, and looks forward to his trip to the Negev. The Arielis have tried to recant their previous boasts of the Negev's beauty, but Mike will not listen. They are confident though that, as a sensible person, he will soon see what an utter wasteland the Negev is.

The date for the wedding is set. The Arielis begin to prepare for veridah, securing visas and notifying their employers. Benjamin's fellow office workers congratulate him on his coup, but none of them know that he has acquired the money for his plans by embezzling funds from the government office. Their friends are green with envy as the Arielis await Mike's return from the desert, gloating over their triumph of match-making.

Trouble, however, comes from two sources. Tzip, determined to stop the marriage by any means possible, leaves erroneous messages for Mike at his hotel in Beer Sheva, such that he will not show up at the party which the Arielis have arranged. She even goes as far as to sabotage Mrs. Arieli's baking (replacing sugar with salt), thus trying to deprive her unpatriotic parents of their chance to gloat over their shadchanut. As her parents furtively pepper their speech with as many American idioms as possible, Tzip responds by increasing the number of Hebrew literary allusions in hers, providing a linguistic counterpoint to their banality.

When even these tactics fail to prevent the scheme from proceeding, Tzip runs away from home, forcing attention to be paid to her previously ignored protests against the family's plans for veridah. She takes refuge at Micha's house (the other good character), causing general pandemonium to break out at the Arieli household.

Yet, for all of Tzip's hard work, the true downfall of the Arielis' plot comes not from her invocation of biblical texts or her childish attempts to derail the plan. Rather, in Act III there is a twist ending; Mike has "fallen in love" with the Negev. He no longer wants to return to Texas at all. Instead, he will set up a Texas-style ranch down in the desert. He envisions Tamara as a rancher's wife, a shepherdess and farm-hand, contrary to her dream of being a glamorous pop singer. He also considers doing what would be for the Arielis the ultimate foolishness -- joining a kibbutz.

No amount of "talking sense" can make Mike change his mind. Moreover, he has cabled his intentions to his father in Texas who has wholeheartedly endorsed Mike's plan for aliyah. As Mike speaks animatedly of importing advanced American agricultural technology to the sands of the

Negev, the Arielis are utterly despondent, for not only are they in financial trouble due to Benjamin's embezzling, but the M.P.'s are knocking on the door to escort Tamara off to the Army induction center.

The play ends on a triumphant and prophetic note. The foolish, small-minded Arielis are foiled in their attempt to evade their nationalist responsibilities by the romantic idealism mixed with pragmatism of the American youth. The pure voice of the Negev and chalutzit appeal to Mike. Tamara has lost her taste for the eccentric Mr. Abrahams, whom she considers to be irrational, bordering on mad. Micha looks forward to resuming his courtship of Tamara, as Tzip remains alone on stage, ending the play with a quotation from Jeremiah.

Further discussion of *I Like Mike* follows after the next section.

31 Mordecai Bernstein's *A Private Secretary*.

Author of numerous burlesque-style comedies, Bernstein, also known as Mordecai Ben Z'vi, was primarily active in the nineteen thirties and forties. No other biographical information is available.³²

A Private Secretary was originally written in 1942, but was vastly revised and printed for the first time in 1959 in a collection of Bernstein's plays.³³ Though it is not important in the development of Israeli drama, it is in many respects typical of the realistic, topical plays of the nineteen-fifties. Like Meged's play, it is also a comedy, but in a less serious vein.

Synopsis.

The characters in *A Private Secretary* are: Aryeh Aaronson, a workers' supervisor and part-time lecturer; Tovah, his wife; Oved, their son; Minah Rosengarten, a new immigrant from America; Nahum Kasselstein, municipal housing director; Shifra, his wife; Shlomo Katz,

director of cooperative stores in the city; Aviva, his wife; Meir Safir, a director of youth centers, single; Mr. Ben-Zav, a man of means, busy in Hebrew language research; Z'vi, a representative of a kibbutz.

Act I takes place in Aryeh's study. Tovah complains that her husband neglects the family because of his dedication to his lecturing. Out of the blue, Miss Rosengarten appears. Her father is a well-known Hebrew professor in the United States who comes from the same Polish town as Aryeh. Minah is so impressed by Aryeh's speeches that she wants to become his private secretary. She has also heard in the United States that in Israel, in order to get real work (which she does not financially need), one needs "protektzia." Aryeh's ego is flattered, and he takes Minah on as private secretary without pay. In return, she will better her halting Hebrew and learn the fine points of rhetoric for which Aryeh has a reputation.

Minah is the model of American corporate efficiency and she creates all sorts of new rules for Aryeh. Groups must now ask him ten days in advance of a requested lecture. He must cut down his schedule from six per day to one every three days. She also insists that he write his speeches instead of talking off the cuff. Soon the news is all over town; Aryeh is the envy of all his friends as he has the ultimate status symbol, a private secretary. Minah's innovations soon become accepted minhag in Aryeh's circle of friends.

Aryeh's problems are not only uxorial. His son Oved doesn't like college very much, preferring to play tennis. He would like to drop out and join the military academy. Oved is tired of being dependent, but his father wants him to be a white-collar professional (though his speeches are most often on the virtues of manual labor), which requires continued education.

Minah's innovations soon collapse on Aryeh. Four of his friends arrive consecutively on the same day asking him to deliver lectures the next week all at the same time. His ego gets the best of him and he agrees to do all four. To accomplish this, all four ceremonies will have to be combined; the dedications of a new apartment block, a new cooperative store and a youth center will be mixed in with Aryeh's address to a Hebrew language association. One can only imagine its incoherence:

Act II takes place three months later. In spite of initial problems, Minah has now imposed order upon Aryeh and his life. His office is now efficiently run. She even has him doing twenty minutes of exercise every day. He now prepares to give his first "real speech" written under Minah's new system in which he must use notecards. Also for the first time (Minah's idea), tickets have been sold. Aryeh is saddened by the fact that not every comrade has the required grush for admission. Minah laughs and says "let them read about it in the newspapers." (This "let them eat cake" attitude however, is untypical of her behavior elsewhere in the play.)

Everyone it seems, is either in love with or lusts for Minah. As Aryeh is on the way to the lecture, Minah tries to work in the office but is interrupted by a stream of visitors. Oved bursts in proclaiming his passion for her but she prevents the situation from getting overheated and puts the relationship on "hold."

Evan Tovah, who at first was a bit jealous of the time Aryeh spends alone with Minah, thanks her profusely. Because of the efficiency which Minah has imposed upon Aryeh, he now has plenty of time for the family.

While the cat (Aryeh) is away, the mice (his friends) try to play. Each in turn comes into the study (when they are supposed to be at the lecture), on their own pretense. They ask Minah to help them to straighten out their lives as she did with Aryeh's. In response, she offers concrete, pragmatic advice. Each in turn makes sexual advances upon her, but she only toys with them.

Shlomo, bored with life, is advised to take up a hobby -- in his case, rabbit-raising. Meir, who complains of loneliness, is advised to get a dog. Nachum is advised to take up fishing in order to cure his anxieties. Again, as in Moliere's comedies, there is a great deal of running in one door and out another, as their wives (who have noticed the men's absence at the lecture), jealously stalk their husbands whom they know are in love with, or at least lust for, Minah.

In these visits, little is revealed about Minah's personality, other than her penchant for quick, simple solutions for seemingly complex problems. It is then that Z'vi comes for a visit. Minah recounts a brief love affair she had with a shaliach in New York. She tells how they were drawn together by mutual loneliness (p.374):

(Back in New York)...I thought to myself, How much heaviness of heart there is here! Loneliness all around. But here too (in Israel), there is also so much aloneness. I have the impression here, that everyone is running away from himself, like he has committed some great sin.

Z'vi and Minah discuss life in Israel, contrasting the pointless lives of the city-dwellers with the idealism of the kibbutznikim. They agree that Aryeh and his friends are rather pathetic, not just because of their middle-age crises but because they have left the kibbutz, where they belong. They have been made small-minded by urban life and are alienated from their roots. Perhaps the movement (unspecified, but of

which they are all a part), has made a bad mistake in expanding its activities into the city. Z'vi laments that the movement (and perhaps the nation), has lost track of its original intentions and ideals (p.375): "That's how it always is here, we start a great many things, but we don't often finish."

Act II concludes with a visit by Mr. Ben-Zav. He seeks to improve his literacy in English (the mark of the real intellectual). Minah will tutor him on the works of Shakespeare in exchange for his lessons on proper Hebrew accent and expression. As with her other visitors, she toys with Ben-Zav's affections, allowing him only a short kiss.

Act III takes place six months later. The same procession of friends visit Minah in Aryeh's study as she prepares her first Hebrew lecture. They are now all involved with their hobbies and are no longer consumed by their work for the movement. Thanks to Minah, they are now better able to cope with the alienation of urban life.

Oved has given up on his pursuit of Minah, who has spurned all his affections. He has also dropped the idea of becoming a tennis star.

After all, suppose, after many years of hard practice and work, one were to reach the top here in Israel. What would that mean, to be the tennis champion of Israel? What would happen? Some new immigrant would come over from the United States and throw all that effort out the window.

Instead, Oved takes up his university studies more seriously. He will become a Hebrew professor, and will always have plenty of work, since there will always be massive new waves of immigrants coming into the country.

Meanwhile, Ben-Zav is making fine progress in his Shakespeare studies and speaks a highly literate English. The other men try to

show off to one another their competency (sic) in the international language. Their wives complain about this, as they, busy with raising children, have not had the requisite leisure time to study English. They are also resentful of Minah and her privileged upbringing.

This major conflict takes up the last ten pages of the play. Minah has always been infatuated with Aryeh, who has been too busy to notice. When they finally do kiss however, his "lips are cold." Years of living in the sterile environment of the city have sapped his passion. Her mind is made up. Her life as Aryeh's private secretary having proved disappointing, she (p.395) will seek out..."a more tempestuous life." She will go with Z'vi to his kibbutz where life is physically more difficult, but more meaningful.

Most upset about her decision is Tovah, who does not know how they can go on without Minah and the order which she created in their lives. Aryeh is resigned to his unfulfilled desires for Minah. But Minah seeks more than physical pleasure in her life, and is stirred by Z'vi's portrayal of kibbutz life. As the play draws to its conclusion, she says:

Minah: ...Do you know how this American head of mine seduces and beguiles me? It says to me, Minah, whatever your heart desires, you shall not attain. And whatever you are able to attain, you have already done.

Z'vi: Really? Is that what upsets you so much? Is that why your blood boils so?

Minah: Yes, Z'vi, and how much it rages! Now my mind begins to prosecute, to accuse my identity. It tells me: Minah, you must go and breathe freely, to do things your own way. But here (in the city), I'm suffocating! Things here are so drab, so average, so mediocre. There is also greatness here, but it too oppresses me--it is too much for me. Both of them strangle me. So my mind says: Go search out your true comrades, just plain folks. You must get yourself to the kibbutz.

As the play concludes, Minah bids farewell to the city-dwellers and prepares to accompany Z'vi in his return to the kibbutz.

An Analysis of the Two Plays.

In both style and substance, *I Like Mike* and *A Private Secretary* have much in common. While Meged is primarily known as an author of works of a more serious tone, here, at least, he tries his hand at the almost burlesque medium employed more often by Bernstein. Yet it is not by virtue of Meged's stature as a writer which alone accounts for the fact that his play was chosen for production by a prestigious Israeli theater while Bernstein's works were confined to lesser companies. *A Private Secretary*, as noted in Bernstein's introduction to the published version in 1959, is almost a total re-write of the 1942 original, but it too strongly bears the marks of the previous era of less skilled plays to be compared fairly with Meged's. In comparison, it is rather weak.

Both plays derive much of their intended comic effects by use of language. In each, the city-dwellers speak slang-infested and poorly pronounced Hebrew; the Arielis even employ the wrong prepositions, ignoring the use of et, using the incorrect construction matai she... and others consistently throughout the play. They, like Aryeh's urban (but not urbane) friends pepper their speech with American English that, in the words of a contemporary Israeli expression is "half coffee, half tea." Just as they are alienated and confused, so their speech reflects their lack of rootedness. In both plays (Tzip in *I Like Mike* and Ben-Zav in *A Private Secretary*) grammatically correct Hebrew has its defenders.

Both plays make much the same polemic points (again, as delineated by S. Levy), which need not be entirely rehashed here. Though it is no longer the bastion of socialism (as portrayed by Ashman and Beilin), the kibbutz is upheld as the model for Israeli society. It is still the home of the idealist, and those who reject its values are either villains or buffoons. Meged had written a more serious play *Hedva and I*³⁴ a few years previous (adapted from a novel of the same name), in which a kibbutznik, in order to assuage his wife, leaves the kibbutz for the city where he finds only bureaucratic pettiness and corruption. In a lighter vein, the same points are made in *I Like Mike*. Both seem to reflect autobiographical reality.³⁵

Artistically however, Bernstein's and Meged's plays represent a quantum leap from the two plays discussed in the last chapter. Though both are still more polemic than great drama, no longer are we confronted by long diatribes on the virtues of socialism and its Zionist manifestation on the kibbutz. Instead, there is a more natural dialogue. The problem, in turn (as Zussman pointed out), is that the dialogue is even too believable. We see two "slices of life," in the tradition of Odets,³⁶ but there is little singled-out in the plays which the audience would not see on its own. Unlike the poetic realism of the American dramatists, these two plays border on the pedantic.

Finally (though it is more the case with Bernstein than with Meged), the two playwrights employ a realism no longer constrained by the borders of the older, ostensibly socialist-realism of Ashman and Beilin. It is no longer the Marxian historical dialectic that dictates the plays' endings but the facts of real-life in Israel. Minah and Mike decide to become kibbutznikim not out of ideological, didactic reasoning, but be-

cause people seem happier there. They have both seen the emptiness of urban life and have chosen to reject it. It is not the triviality of the nouveau riche that causes Minah to emigrate, but the loneliness in American urban society that propels her. She hopes to find in Israel a comradeship she has lacked. Similarly, Mike is not driven either from America or Tel-Aviv by the oppressiveness of the ruling class (he is in fact, unashamed of his family's wealth). Rather, it is the dirt in the streets that inclines his ear to the voice of the Negev romantically calling out. The two characters do not so much despise or disclaim their former lives (as do Rose/Vardah in *Banim* and Yehudah in *Min Hametzar*); rather, they hope to find in Israel a purer, simpler and more wholesome life.

For all their attempts at realism, neither playwright has painted a totally convincing portrait of an American Jew; again, in context of the time that would have been unlikely. Both Mike and Minah primarily serve as foils, against whom the more well-known Israeli stereotypes are presented. Minah, however, is a bit more fleshed-out than Mike, as we do learn something of her life in America. Unlike the lives of the Silvers and the Stevenses, it is not portrayed as having been an obsessive, continual race for dollars. Minah's father is a Hebrew Professor, and apparently does not quarrel with her plans for aliyah. He even knows a bit about Israeli realities, as he has advised her on the need for "protektzia." All we know about Mike's father is that he is a rather benevolent patron, yet he too (unlike the parents of Rose/Vardah and Yehudah), endorses his son's plans for aliyah. Perhaps the check-book, chicken-dinner Zionists have now realized the need for American Jewish bodies as well as cash in the emerging State. In all, though we

might want to see more internal motivation in both Mike and Minah, they are much more real as persons than are the American character encountered in earlier plays.

Not only do Meged's *I Like Mike* and Bernstein's *A Private Secretary* present more fully fleshed-out American characters, these American Jews are no longer superficial. They have internal fortitude. Gershon Shaked writes:

Whereas in Ashman the comedy derives from a conflict of values -- he presented those of the yishuv as positive and his Americans either accept or reject them -- in Meged it comes from a values transference, from the claim that the values of the original propagators were picked up by the new immigrants, to the natives' surprise.³⁷

This is similarly the case in *A Private Secretary*: contrasted with the hypocrisy of Aryeh and his friends -- who wax poetic about the virtues of manual labor while ensconced in cushy jobs -- Minah represents not only honesty, but a return to the original Zionist values. Unlike the earlier plays, these plays present American characters who are not only open to new ideas, but who have brought with them -- from the golah of all places -- a spirit of idealism now fading from Israeli society. In the view of the two playwrights, Mike, Minah and others like them are the new blood which the Israeli sick-man desperately needs. It is not they who need to be re-educated but the Israelis around them. In an ironic twist, the values of the American characters need to be transferred to and adopted by Israeli society. At least for Meged, this is not surprising, as Chaim Shoham writes (at the conclusion of his extended essay on Meged's plays):

The world-view (hashkafat haolam) of the kibbutz and its values, as we have seen, are that which anchor the view of reality and permanence in Meged's drama. The kibbutz in Meged's opinion, is the sole unique product of Israel's natives and their children.³⁸

Both Mike and Minah, unlike the Israelis around them, see the light and are compelled to accept its truth.

Summary and Conclusions

The period from 1948 to 1960 saw slow and painful progress of the original Hebrew play in Israel from the thinly veiled propaganda-reportage plays of an earlier period. Yet most playwrights (with few exceptions), continued to write topical plays of which *I Like Mike* and *A Private Secretary* are quite typical. Their creators still eschewed highly personalized expression in favor of rendering service to the still infant State.

Both plays humorously (if acerbically) satirize the sad state of contemporaneous Israeli urban life. In each, a call to return to the values of the original chalutzim is put in unlikely places -- the mouths of young American Jews. Both plays extend the hope that, infused with new blood, Israeli society can get back on its feet again.

Using only dramaturgical criteria, neither play is terribly good theater. Bernstein's play, with its one-dimensional characters running in and out of doors is pure vaudeville, unembellished with song. The few moments wherein serious points are made seem somehow out of place, as there are sudden shifts in the characters' style of language. Meged too, is certainly not at his best in *I Like Mike*. One reviewer summarizes:

This play, which Aharon Meged calls a comedy, has none of the distinguishing characteristics of that form. There is weakness in the dialogue and thinness in the shaping of his characters. Only at times does he provide amusement in the manner of the classic farce. There are, with all of this, still a few funny situations.

This being the case, a few observations remain to be made. First, the two plays present American Jewish characters in a sympathetic and somewhat realistic manner not present in earlier works for the stage. Ironically, it is they who are now the heroes from whom corrupt Israelis need to learn.

Second, American Jews are no longer portrayed as being universally rich beyond belief. Though Mike's father is wealthy, Minah's is not. Similarly, both young people are willing to live rustic lives in the Israeli countryside, forsaking the comforts of both the city and the America they left. It is the provincial Arieli family which has the distorted view of the world (Texas, it seems, is a stone's throw from New York). They, not the American tourist, lust after dollars. Materialism and conspicuous consumption are no longer trademarks of only American Jews; the virus affects Israel too.

Finally, the common attribute of Mike and Minah is not so much their naive romanticism (though each possess it to a large extent), but their pragmatism. They bring with them an American mentality much needed in Israel, where the growing bureaucracy threatens to strangle the Zionist vision in its cradle. Mike has seen the inefficient agricultural methods being used in Israel and determines to import high-level American technology. He speaks animatedly of the larger tractors and combines they use on the ranch in Texas and imagines them rolling over the still barren expanses of the Negev. Minah too, sees Aryeh's

inefficiency and is appalled. She takes his old-world, paper-strewn office and transforms it in the image of I.B.M. Less romantic than the Negev which enchants Mike, nonetheless, modern business methods will have to be adopted if Israel is to progress economically, and American Jews are likely sources for these innovations.

This pragmatism was indeed foreshadowed in *Min Ha'metzar* more than twenty years previous to *I Like Mike*. In it, it is Yehudah (the former American), who constantly rallies his comrades, enjoining them to stop their internecine strife, saying: "We must all see the whole vision." Yet Yehudah, by the time we meet him in the play, is no longer really an American. He has so much accepted and internalized the values of the kibbutz that he is now a different person. The values transference is complete, and there remains little visibly American about him. Mike and Minah, on the other hand, though they have made major decisions about their futures, are still essentially the same persons they were at the beginning of the two plays. Minah and Mike have only modified previously held opinions, reflecting a healthier self-image. They undergo only a partial rather than a radical values-transformation, which in the opinion of many psychologists who have written on the topic, shows a greater degree of ego integrity.⁴⁰ The Silvers in Beilin's play, in contrast, are so flimsily put together that once challenged, they quickly fall apart at the seams. The Silvers and the Stevenses live in an illusion: the golah has made them into pathetic, valueless creatures. Mike and Minah, on the other hand, as much as we know about them, are self-assured (albeit naive) youths who have been able to separate themselves from the golah and emerge intact.

As will be seen, this rather positive image of American Jews in Israeli plays did not persist. As the reality of "waves upon waves of new immigrants" (perhaps many from America), did not materialize, the optimism of *I Like Mike* and *A Private Secretary* became dated. Unlike the physical challenge of taming the Negev, the new realities of Israeli life in the nineteen-sixties presented more fundamental threats to the State's intellectual integrity, and even its physical survival. It is for these reasons and others (detailed in the ensuing chapter), that the generally positive image of American Jewry in these two plays would no longer be seen by and large in later works for the Israeli stage.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV:

1. Quoted in Alcalay, op.cit. p. 179.
2. The opinions of Shaked, Amramson, Kohansky et. al. are all of the same tone on this point. Some, such as Israel Gur in his continuing column in Bama have been apologetic, maintaining that this was a necessary phase. Ofrat shows how this genre provided the basis for more subtle forms.
3. Hebrew title: הוא הלך בשדות
4. Reported in Abramson, op.cit. p. 53.
5. Ibid.
6. Hebrew title: בערבות הנגב Also known as The Sands of the Negev.
7. Hebrew title: הם יגיעו מחר
8. Described in Abramson, Kohansky and E. Levy in location. Army officers, fresh from battle, were shocked and angered by their denigration on the stage and more than one performance was interrupted -- some even brought to a halt -- by soldiers climbing on stage to put an end to the "slander".
9. Abramson, op.cit. p. 58.
10. Hebrew title: בדרך אילה
11. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 161.
12. Hebrew title: הים ובית
13. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 162.
14. Ezra Zussman, quoted in Kohansky ibid.
15. Hebrew title: שש כנפים לאחר
16. Hebrew: סורא
17. Hebrew title: שחזור על גבי לבן
18. Hebrew title: בית הלל
19. Hebrew title: קראו לי סימקא
20. Kohansky, op.cit. p. 164.
21. Hebrew title: ליל סופה
22. Hebrew title: זרוק אחרון לכלבים
23. S. Levy uses this play to make a general point, seeing it -- the necessary limitation of journalistic freedom in the new State -- as a major theme in Israeli drama. While no other writer on the subject has seen this as a central theme, at the time of the play's premiere, it was a burning issue in Israeli politics.
24. Abramson, op.cit. p. 64.
25. Hebrew: אי לייק מייק
26. Biographical information on Aharon Meged is taken from Encyclopaedia Judaica article, "Aharon Meged."

27. Hebrew title: **החי על המג**
28. Orot #29. November-December 1956 p. 52 (note).
29. My thanks to Dr. Seymore Gitin, formerly of H.U.C. - J.I.R. Jerusalem School who starred in the film version in the title role for discussing the film. (Rabbi Gitin was chosen for the role for his authentic American accented Hebrew).
30. S. Levy, A Critical Study ... pp. 41-45.
31. Hebrew title: **מזכירה פרטית**
32. Biographical information on Mordecai Bernstein taken from the little information given in the prefaces and title pages of his many published books of plays, including **תשעה בחזרה** (1959) and **לב חדש** (1932).
33. Hebrew title: **תשעה בחזרה**
34. Hebrew title: **חנה ואני**
35. See article in Enc. Jud. Meged for several years dwelt outside the country as a cultural attache, a post which he felt necessary to fill but which nonetheless troubled him greatly.
36. Professor Shoham makes the comparison, which seems apt. But it would be a severe overstatement to place the two on the same level, at least to the extent Meged is represented by I Like Mike. The subtlety of Odets simply isn't there.
37. Shaked, Gershon. "A Mirror Up to Nature", in H.B.R. IV: 3. Autumn, 1971.
38. Shoham, H. Challenge and Reality in Israeli Drama, p. 144. (See bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew).
39. A.V. (initials not identified). Capsule review, "Al I Like Mike l'Aaron Meged", in Orot #29, op.cit.
40. Glanz, David and Harrison, Michael I. "Varieties of Identity Transformation: The Case of Newly Orthodox Jews." Article in Jewish Journal of Sociology #20, December, 1978. pp. 129-141.

CHAPTER V

American Jewish Life is Laughable: Polemics Become Vitriolicin Realistic Israeli Plays of the 1960's.

In those days I also saw Jews who had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon and of Moab. Their children spoke half in the language of Ashdod, and could not speak in the language of Judea, but in the languages of other peoples. So I contended with them, and I cursed them, and I pulled on their hair. And I made them take an oath by God saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons, or for yourselves..."

-Nehemiah 13:23-25¹

A truism of literary history holds that a given genre reaches its zenith of artistry in near proximity to or at the end of its life. In the development of realistic Israeli drama at least, this maxim seems to obtain. The plays considered in this chapter are atypical of the new stylistic direction followed in Israel after roughly the year 1960. Unlike the newer genres of existentialist, expressionist, and absurdist drama (of which the plays discussed in Chapter VI are conservative representatives), they are the last vestiges of the older theatrical direction which, in the past two decades, has slowly faded from the Israeli scene.

These plays make much the same polemical points as did earlier and less skilled works, but often in a more sophisticated manner. At the same time, they address problems such as massive yeridah and Israel's increasingly isolated diplomatic situation, which had been far less

pressing in the nineteen-fifties. Yet they are very much the ideological and artistic heirs of the previous realist tradition.

This chapter offers a capsule history of Israeli drama from roughly 1960 to the mid nineteen-seventies. Afterwards one play, Hanoch Bartov's *Go Home Jonathan!* is discussed in depth. Two others, Aharon Meged's *Goldsmith and Son* and Yigal Mossinson's *A Happy Evening on Park Avenue* are dealt with more summarily. Again, an analysis and conclusions are found at the end of the chapter.

Major Developments in Israeli Drama 1960 - 1973.

Already in the nineteen-fifties, as noted in the previous chapter, Israeli critics and audiences alike were no longer satisfied with an evening at the theater consisting of a relentless panegyric to Israeli patriotism. Critics especially decried the excesses to which naturalism had led in pedestrian dialogue, lack of character development and plot predictability. At the same time, the development of other, non-State-supported theaters (Cameri, Ohel, Zuta, et.al.) as well as the Haifa Municipal Theater, put new emphasis on the production of plays which would see a financial profit. While Habima (which is State-subsidized) could continue to be the patron of original Israeli drama, other theaters had to contend with the realities of the public's preferences. By and large this meant a greater tendency towards the production of foreign plays.

Reacting to this situation, Israeli playwrights traveled three major paths. Though some plays can be placed in more than one category, these generally were:

1. Allegories with biblical and other historical themes. Unlike the mere re-tellings of well-known Bible stories common in pre-Independence drama, these were plays often meant to reveal truths about modern Israeli society and the world. Aloni's *Most Cruel of all, the King*² (Habima 1953), and Moshe Shamir's *The War of the Sons of Light*³ (Cameri 1955), discussed universal problems - in both cases, democracy - in relationship to both modern Israel and the world at large. Considered a landmark by all scholars, *Most Cruel of All* simultaneously was a leap in the direction of universalism and in the development of a specifically Israeli style. It also showed the weakness of most Israeli drama that had preceded it.

Similarly, Meged's *Genesis*⁴ (Habima 1962), took the familiar story of Adam and Eve in the garden, but utterly rejected the accepted morals of the tale. Clothed in light-hearted comedy, it nonetheless is cynical, philosophical, amusing and tragic⁵. Adam and Eve are no longer primeval characters in a misty age, but flesh and blood people, imbued with all the human foibles. The Serpent is a loveable, comic figure, much in defiance of the traditional religious view.

Even less tied to the original Bible story whence it derives is Yehuda Amichai's *Journey to Nineveh*⁶ (Habima 1964). Jonah is portrayed as the little man -- an Everyman -- who insulates himself from his own internal struggles by fulfilling concrete tasks. Far more than a thinly veiled critique of modern Israeli society, it is a dramatic statement of the loneliness, isolation and sense of alienation in the modern world so often present in Amichai's poetry.⁷

As with his poetry, *Journey to Nineveh* has no single interpretation.⁸ It is a play filled with nuance and calculated vagueness which, rather than presenting the viewer with a pre-packaged world-view, leaves it to one's imagination to fill in the blanks. In all, like the other plays mentioned above, it takes the biblical character and transforms him into a more familiar human being. Jonah is a non-hero (unlike the larger-than-life heroes of the Bible and earlier Israeli plays), with whom an audience can deeply empathize.

These and other similar plays, e.g., Meged's *The High Season*⁹ and Israeli Eliraz's *The Rebel and the King*¹⁰ (Habima 1967 and Haifa Municipal 1968 respectively), continued to achieve popularity with both audiences and critics alike throughout the sixties. Unlike earlier efforts, all of them are cast in an expressionist mold, in which the audience is called upon to consider anew basic human, existential problems. Their resemblance to earlier plays based on biblical themes is, in fact, only recalled by their settings.

Quite similar to these were the numerous plays concerning the Nazi Holocaust. Unlike earlier plays which simply -- though passionately -- retold the grim events which took place in Europe, these plays began to question the basic relationship of the Jew as outsider in a gentile world. Typical of these was Leah Goldberg's *The Lady of the Castle*¹¹ (Cameri 1955). More than a re-hashing of the Nazi atrocities, Goldberg presented the contrast between an older European culture and the new, developing Jewish identity in Israel. Yet she did so without resorting to the black-and-white characterizations of a previous era. It was the first of many plays which explored the spiritual and psychic damage

caused to the Jewish people by the Holocaust. The major conflict in the play for example, is that the lady of the castle needs to be convinced (in 1955), that it is safe to leave the castle, that the Holocaust is over. Perhaps Goldberg suggests, the ovens are now destroyed, but the root causes of the Holocaust are endemic to western civilization.¹² The Jew is an eternal outsider in the golah.

Similarly, Ben-Zion Tomer's *The Children of the Shadow*¹³ (Habima 1962), deals with the problems of Holocaust survivors who settle in Israel. Try as they might, they are too scarred by the experience, too much injured by the golah to fit in naturally with their sabra neighbors. It and several other plays do not so much re-tell the horrid events as they limn the havoc wrought by the Germans on the Jewish spirit as on its six million bodies.

2. Existential-Expressionist and Absurdist Plays. Primarily but not exclusively represented by Nissim Aloni, this genre (also labeled as "Modernism" by Abramson), will be discussed briefly in Chapter VI. However, it need be remembered that the plays discussed below were written after the first gusts of the modernist winds had blown through Israel. It is in light of the experimental phase into which Israeli drama had entered -- as far back as the mid nineteen-fifties -- which nonetheless seems to be totally ignored by the plays discussed in this chapter that makes them so plainly members of the previously dominant school of realism.

3. Revitalized "Poetic Realism". This genre, of which all the plays discussed below are only marginally a part, is a direct offshoot of the nineteen-fifties Israeli mainstream. Gideon Ofra¹⁴ considers the style of both Nathan Alterman's *Inn of Ghosts*¹⁵ as well as Tomer's *Children* to be a bridge between that of the fifties and the sixties. Both, he points out, are highly reminiscent of the poetic realism in American plays of the forties and fifties (especially those by Tennessee Williams and William Sorayan).¹⁶ Of Alterman's play he writes:

The Children of the Shadow exemplifies the style of Israeli plays of the sixties: Its roots are (still) in national problems (in the style of the fifties), but in essence, its world is the internal world of the individual, the same world that brings with it a sense of the absurd in other plays of the sixties...¹⁷

These plays (as well as many others), while addressing themselves to rather concrete problems, do so in an imaginative manner. Many employ heavy doses of symbolism -- (as in Bar-Yosef's *Tura* and even, in a humorous vein, several plays by Kishon) -- in an attempt to elevate the mundane problems of Israeli life to the level of artistic insight.

At the same time, plays in this genre are cautious in their experimentalism. They take as their models the more conservative western playwrights mentioned above rather than its more avant-garde elements. This (as pointed out both by E. Levy and Kohansky), had still to do with the artistic atmosphere in Israel at the time. When, for example, one of Sartre's plays was performed in 1955, the audience seemed dumbfounded.¹⁸ Critics struggled for weeks trying to make sense of it. Similarly, the first Israeli performances of Beckett were met with utter confusion. Only after Nissim Aloni transformed the French theatre d'absurd style

into a specifically Israeli version of it did the more adventurous genre become comprehensible to the Israeli public. Even then, he was met with less than universal acceptance.

The two plays discussed below are best grouped with the genre of poetic realism common to Israeli plays of the late fifties and which continued even into the mid-seventies. Ofra¹⁹ calls the genre "a bridge between past and present." Unfortunately, these plays are not the most skilled examples of the style.

²⁰
Hanoch Bartov's *Go Home, Jonathan!*

Born in 1926, Bartov fought in both World War II (with the Jewish Brigade, about which he wrote a novel in 1968), and in the Israeli War of Liberation. For three years (1966-68), he was the Israeli cultural attache in London. Known as both novelist and playwright, his most important play has been *Each Had Six Wings*²¹ (1954) which dealt with the problems of new immigrants in Israel. Another work, *The Reckoning and the Soul* (1953), deals with the disillusionment of Israeli youth returning to the now bureaucracy filled civilian life of the nation after the War of Liberation. After a visit in the United States, he wrote a book of humorous short stories on his adventures titled *Four Israelis and All America*²² in 1961. More than a mere travelogue, the stories poke fun not only at the provincialism of the Israelis, but more importantly, at social problems in the United States. One of them, "What About the Negroes, Eh?"²³ is a particularly scathing attack on American society and its hypocrisy. Bartov, like so many of Israel's cultural luminaries, is the product of a kibbutz upbringing.

Go Home, Jonathan was produced by Zuta (one of the smaller Israeli companies), in 1963 and has a rather interesting history. The play was originally titled *The Founding Fathers* and written with a rather large cast in mind, but as is explained in its opening scene, financial considerations caused some major changes. The play was taken on tour of the kibbutz circuit and the company could only afford one taxi to transport all the actors, their props and costumes. As the car only had room for five, Bartov was forced to rewrite the play for fewer characters. To solve the problem, he cleverly created a character called "the fifth" who acts as narrator, provider of a running commentary and a stand-in for all the minor parts -- often with great comic effect. The play has not been published.²⁴

Synopsis.

The first scene of the play takes place on a moshav (K'far Shaul) in present day (1963) Israel. All the other action takes place in the New York apartment of the Shneiran family. The characters are: Meshullam Shneirson, age 64, a moshavnik, an old-time chalutz; Jonathan, his son, an Israeli diplomat in New York; Jean, Jonathan's American-born wife; Leora, their high-school aged daughter; the "Fifth", sometimes the narrator, mover of scenery - he also plays a house servant, a wealthy American Jew, a moshavnik, as well as the ambassadors of several countries.

The action opens on K'far Shaul, where Meshullam anxiously awaits the arrival of a letter from his diplomat son. Jonathan had originally gone to New York shortly after his participation in the War of Liberation, intending to stay only a few months. In the ensuing time, he has yielded to pressures both from the Israeli foreign service and his American wife

to remain in New York. The original tour of duty has now grown to more than thirteen years. Jonathan writes to his father of his longing to return to Israel, but every time their bags are packed for the return trip, some new diplomatic emergency prevents him from returning. Meshullam, wanting to put a stop to this, and to be able to see the granddaughter he has only heard about, has had enough. On the spur of the moment, he buys a ticket to New York and arrives at his son's apartment in New York just minutes after the telegram announcing his surprise visit.

Meshullam is shocked by what he finds: Jonathan has written home that really, he lives in New York but his apartment is "Israeli territory." Yet there is nothing recognizably Israeli about his family's life. They are attended to by Ben, a black servant who (portrayed by "the fifth") acts like a shuffling dorky, saying "Yes'm" and "No suh" to their questions. Worst of all, Leora can't speak Hebrew! Though she understands the language, the family speaks only English to each other.

Jonathan tries to apologize, but because the visit was unexpected, he must fulfill previously made obligations and has little time to spend with his father. He is enmeshed in a heavy schedule of cocktail parties with other diplomats and with fund-raising dinners with American Jews, at which he must deliver the pep-talks. His life consists of entertaining a constant procession of diplomats from countries (some fictional), which seem to have no importance to Israel. His wife is constantly in search of proper dresses to wear at gatherings of American Jewish women.

Leora, left alone in the apartment with Grampa (whom she refuses to call "sabah"), is unable to communicate with him. Instead, the tele-

vision drones on and on all day, interrupted only by Leora's frequent teen-age gossiping on the telephone with boyfriends. When Meshullam discovers that these boyfriends include goyim, he is sent into an utter state of depression. He refuses to accompany the family on trips to New York, saying, "I have seen enough of the golah already, back in Russia. You can keep it for yourselves." He refuses to participate at all in the life of cocktail parties and fund-raising, not even bothering to get out of his pajamas. Meshullam increasingly becomes a problem for the family as he is not only a pain in the neck to have in the house but is a frequent embarrassment.

Nothing it seems is right in America. Meshullam chides Jonathan about the black house-servant: "Are there no Jews here that need work that you have to go out and hire a goy?" He has no understanding of his granddaughter's attachment to American pop-stars, which one day she would like to be. Though Jonathan has apparently tried to teach Leora about the country in which she was born (but from which she was taken as an infant), she is in all respects (and much to her mother's satisfaction), a typical American girl. Nonetheless, she has a fondness for her sabah with which she ultimately has to come to grips.

Act I ends as Jonathan, in an attempt to get Meshullam out of the house so that his outspokenness will not cause a diplomatic disaster at an upcoming cocktail party, bribes Leora to take him with her for the day. She and Franky Goldberg (her boyfriend, known to all as the "little Zionist", as he speaks of making aliyah someday), take Meshullam along for a ride around town. In return, Jonathan will introduce her to a certain Mr. Lincoln Fox, the wealthy owner of 27 television stations. Perhaps, if she is lucky, she may even be introduced to Paul Anka in exchange for

the favor. Sabah, however, even though he does not understand the English in which the family converses, now realizes how unwanted he is. He demands to be allowed to return to Israel as soon as possible. Jonathan agrees, and attempts once again to get the foreign service to send the family back to Israel, but as it is clear, this will be to no avail.

Act II opens as Jonathan entertains diplomats from certain South Pacific Islands. As he explains to his father, though they and Israel have really nothing in common, in the United Nations every vote is equal, and if good food and drink will provide pro-Israel votes, that is all that matters.

As Jonathan seems more serious about returning this time, Jean puts her foot down. On no account will she go to Israel, preferring to go back to her parents in Miami Beach. Meshullam has given an ultimatum: if Jonathan and his family do not accompany him at once to Israel, he will stage an embarrassing sit-down demonstration at Rockefeller Center, saying that the Israeli diplomat has thrown him out on the streets.

Leora, meanwhile, has undergone a change. She now realizes that Grampa is right. The throw-away society, the conspicuous consumption of American Jewish life, suddenly dawns upon her as evil, and she devises a plan to assist Meshullam. The tales of chalutzit Meshullam has told her, and Franky's encouragement have had an effect. She too now yearns for the more pristine life on the moshav.

Jean is beside herself in grief. She constantly swallows an assortment of pills, trying to calm her nerves. Meshullam has totally destroyed the status quo of their lives. But her troubles are only beginning.

Someone has arranged a party at the Shneirans' apartment. All the usual diplomats and American Jewish "²⁵machers" are invited to honor -- of all people -- Meshullam Shneirson. Jean and Jonny (as his wife calls him), desperately try to keep grampa muzzled but to no avail. Diplomats drop in for this highly original party given to honor one of the founders of the State. Though Meshullam at first refuses to participate, he is eventually persuaded to attend on the condition that Jonathan agree to expedite his return to Israel the next day.

Meshullam's behavior at the party is, predictably, reprehensible. Jonathan and Jean listen in horror as, with each arriving diplomat (played by "the fifth"), the old chalutz acts the curmudgeon. He is intent upon knocking down the diplomatic house of cards which the Israeli diplomat has carefully built over the years. To the ambassador of a small South Pacific Island, Meshullam calmly states that he has never heard of the place. To the Equadorian ambassador he asks naively if there are any Jews in that country. When the ambassador replies that he doesn't really know, Meshullam replies:

It doesn't really matter if you have any Jews there or not...perhaps there are, perhaps there aren't. But one thing I'm sure of. Anti-semitism you must have...after all, didn't we crucify your Jesus--may his name be obliterated--you always can say that about us! When I came to Israel I said "How wonderful: now we are rid of the goyim and they of us!"

To the Greek ambassador, who speaks of the natural kinship of Israel and Greece and of the similarities in their mutually Mediterranean cultures, Meshullam provides a history lesson. He recounts the story behind the Jewish holiday of Chanukkah, making certain to place the emphasis on the cruelties inflicted upon the Jews by the Syrian-Greek, Antiochus-Eriphanes. Rather than recoiling in horror, this ambassador too is

thrilled by Meshullam's honesty, which is in stark contrast to the lies and deceptions which are the stuff of which most diplomatic relations are made.

Jonny and Jean however, are at their wits' end. They have had to serve as the translators of this most undiplomatic dialogue. When Meshullam's effrontery is met with surprising reactions, they are only temporarily relieved as, at the end of the party, enters a certain Mr. Lincoln Fox.

Fox is a captain of American industry, and proudly boasts that his ancestors sailed on the Mayflower. As everyone in New York knows, his W.A.S.P. background is unimpeachable. Everyone, that is, except for Meshullam Schneirson. Fox, on the other hand, finds the old chalutz to be charming, "It's hard to believe this man, direct from the soil, is a Jew!" he says. He would like to make a television documentary on Meshullam's life as a chalutz. But Meshullam sees through him, recognizing Fox as a Jew in a goy's clothing. He remarks:

You ask a Jew if he's a Jew--and he reacts
as if he just sat down upon a scorpion!

Though Jonathan defends Mr. Fox's supposedly blue-blooded pedigree, Meshullam recognizes him as one Koliah Schwartzfox, whom he had known as a boy back in Russia. He calls Mr. Fox to account:

Meshullam: (laughing)...Your grandfather fought
with Lincoln, his grandfather with Washington!
On your life! Your grandfather made his living
as a smuggler!...your grandfather and his grand-
father were at least straight-forward people
Koliah, but you--you are a son of a bitch!

Fox begs Meshullam to lower his voice. He has to admit that what Meshullam claims is true. He is a Jew, but he has had to look like a goy in order to succeed financially in America. He uncomfortably

reminisces with Meshullam about the old days in Russia. Trying to buy Meshullam's silence, he offers a gift of four million dollars to his moshav if the latter will keep his terrible, dark secret. The T.V. special will be made, but only on Meshullam's conditions.

As Jean runs around the house gulping Bufferin, Jonny prepares his resignation. Meshullam's diplomatic blundering must have caused a rift which cannot be mended. Soon, however, the news is all over town; the party was a great success with the diplomatic circle. They all enjoyed the honesty and now, for the first time, they understand Israel and its problems. Perhaps they may even side with Israel the next time a crucial vote arises in the United Nations.

The end of the play is rather predictable. Leora, now more mature, insists upon going to Israel with Sabah, whom she has learned to love. She has seen through her parents' hypocrisy. Jean prepares to leave Jonny, and packs her bags for Miami. Once again, the original Zionist values, absent in the present generation (Jonny and Jean), find rebirth in the new, upcoming generation. Further discussion of *Go Home* is found later in this chapter.

26

Yigal Mossinson's A Happy Evening on Park Avenue

As Abramson notes, *A Happy Evening on Park Avenue* (Haifa Municipal 1965), has:

...an undercurrent of contempt, almost hatred, for the people it describes and embodies the attitude of disdain for diaspora Jews that seemed during the sixties to be a characteristic of many young Israelis. There is no doubt that there are Jews in America like the family the playwright describes, but his generalizations are too wild to be effectual and we are not convinced that his stage family is representative of all American Jewish families.²⁷

As the play is unpublished either in book form or in the Israeli drama periodicals, a copy of the manuscript was sought from Mr. Mossinson, but he could not be located.²⁸ Thus, what follows is a short description taken from Abramson's discussion.

A Happy Evening concerns the Cowan (née Cohen) family. Marshall Cowan is a rich businessman who is only marginally Jewish, and is openly ashamed of his heritage. He is confronted by two sabras, one of whom, Josh, arrogantly and honestly holds all diaspora Jews in contempt, particularly "Anglo-Saxons." In contrast is Dani, who is somewhat more open to the new values he finds in America but is strong enough not to abandon his own Israeli outlook. As Abramson summarizes:

...Both are idealised stock types. The only figure with any life of its own is the daughter, Helen, who, through Josh and her visit to Israel, is able to perceive how far her father has come along the road to assimilation.²⁹

Helen had married a non-Jewish artist and feels rightful bitterness at Marshall, as he had disowned her because of the intermarriage, but was hardly Jewish himself. He celebrates Christmas with a tree, supports

Arab states instead of Israel and is utterly ashamed of his background. Marshall is taken to task for his hypocrisy, not only by his daughter but by his non-Jewish business partner. This sympathetic but utterly implausible character seems to take on personal responsibility for all previous persecutions of the Jewish people. He speaks as the conscience of the play, as he inveighs against Marshall, beseeching him trying to convince him not to go through with his plans to do business with the Arabs.

Marshall is:

...the cliché of cheap American fiction; the rich businessman to whom money is the only deity. He is urbane and controlled and represents...a peg on which the playwright hangs every grievance.³⁰

The play is a diatribe against American Jewish life. Assimilation and denial of one's Jewishness are the hallmarks of its decadence. It also attacks wealth and the effect it has upon the individual. American Jews, especially, seem to be stripped of all morals, as they mindlessly pursue dollars and the American way of life. As Abramson summarizes:

It also clearly demonstrates the author's attitude towards the Jews in the United States, his dislike of their television, apartments and participation in the daily rat race. Mossinson obviously believes that no Jew has the right to be anywhere but in Israel for there lies his salvation.³¹

32
Aharon Meged's Goldsmith and Son

Though in the years after *I Like Mike* Meged had written a rather daring and dramaturgically innovative play (*Genesis*), and had otherwise abandoned the earlier pedantic style of Israeli reportage-realism, in the mid-sixties³³ he wrote a short, one-act play which on all accounts is a reversion to the earlier style. No performance information could be had about *Goldsmith and Son*. Neither is it discussed in any secondary work. Yet, even a short plot summary is revealing for our study.

Goldsmith and Son is a light entertainment in three scenes. Its personages are: Marvin Goldsmith, a wealthy American Jewish tourist; Pearl Goldsmith, his wife and mother of: Zuzi (Joey), an American oleh living on a kibbutz; Uzi, a kibbutz member; Ilana, the kibbutz secretary.

As Pearl and Marvin arrive at the kibbutz, they are searching for their son Joey. They are appalled at the kibbutznikim's brusque speech and their lack of manners. Haughtily, Marvin reassures his wife:

Pearl, this isn't Long Island! This is a kibbutz,
 One must know how to talk to these people. They
 must learn to have some respect for us.

Dialogue very much like that found in Ashman's and Beilin's play ensues. The kibbutznikim do not know any "Joey," but there is a young American named "Zuzi" at the settlement. The Goldsmiths are shocked; not only is "Zuzi" an improper name for a male, but their son's job is cleaning toilets. They are told that they can see their son only after he has finished his work. Marvin tries to impress the kibbutz secretary:

What! You haven't heard the Goldsmith name? We are among the largest denture manufacturers in America. (He sings the jingle): There's no smile like the one you get with dentures from Goldsmith!...

Ilana, being rather unimpressed by this, Marvin shows his Zionist credentials.

Marvin: We give thousands of dollars to UJA each year. We buy many Israel bonds. I personally have planted fifty-five trees here in memory of my grandmother. Certainly, you must have heard of the Goldsmith forest?

Ilana: Here there are many forests.

Marvin: You were born here and you never heard of the Yente Goldsmith Memorial Forest?

When Marvin's "credentials" as a Zionist fail to work, he tries what he considers to be the voice of reason:

Marvin: Does it seem right to you? How can you think it right for the heir to the prestigious Goldsmith Denture Company to be cleaning, eh--sanitary facilities?

Ilana is still unmoved, and scene I ends with Pearl in despair:

Pearl: No! In the very worst of my dreams, how could I ever have imagined that my son--my only son--the one I bore after eighteen hours of horrible labor--that he would be cleaning toilets!

Scene II portrays Pearl in a state of utter despondency. Marvin does his best to cheer her up, reminding her that her son Joey is after all, a smart boy who sooner or later will see the wisdom of returning to Long Island. But Pearl forces him to take more direct action, to free their son from the bonds of kibbutz slavery.

In Scene III Marvin tries to bribe Ilana. He alludes to a very large amount of money he could give the kibbutz, which would drastically improve the "primitive" conditions therein. But Ilana and Uzi uncondi-

tionally turn him down. Instead, they talk about the egalitarianism of the kibbutz. Not only do they all seem crazy, but it seems that Joey is happy in the new situation. Marvin calls all of them "a bunch of ferbrente communists" and is utterly disgusted with them.

When Joey finally appears he too has no intention of leaving the commune. Though he sleeps in what Pearl calls "a stable, a real pig-sty", Joey is happy. Over lunch, during which Marvin offers his son an increased share of the denture business, their conversation turns to open confrontation. Pearl, in tears, has Marvin escort her to the car so that they can escape the hellish place. In a final display of bourgeois decadence, they discover that one of the tires is flat, and neither of them knows how to change it. They are too proud to ask the kibbutznikim for help, and must sit helplessly on the road-side, awaiting assistance.

An Analysis of the Three Plays

Unlike the "poetic realist" plays described in the beginning of this chapter, *Go Home*, *Jonathan!*, *A Happy Evening* and *Goldsmith* are clearly throwbacks to the earlier, pedantic style. Yet they are the only available plays in which American Jews play prominent roles. The same themes present in plays of the pre-Independence era resurface here: American Jews are almost hopelessly locked into a race for money, they show no understanding of Israel and its unique creation -- the kibbutz. And again, the older, decadent generation of Americans is ultimately perceived to be hypocritical by their children, for whom there still exists at least some hope.

While the three plays do not typify the new artistry attained in Israeli drama in the nineteen-sixties, they apparently mirror widely held Israeli perceptions. The most scathing portrait of American Jews (in Mossinson's play), was accorded a warm reception. Similarly, Bartov's play had wide currency in the kibbutz circuit.

On the other hand, the content of the three plays is not surprising. Mossinson, by the nineteen-sixties, was already one of the old school (it should be remembered that he was the author of the quintessential Palmach war-drama), and Meged was already a member of the literary establishment. Bartov too, after *Each Had Six Wives*, was solidly entrenched in the ranks of accepted Israeli playwrights. These plays then, are very much products of the old guard. They are even somewhat reactionary. As Abramson states, even in 1963 when *Go Home, Jonathan!* was performed, the character of Meshullam (the grandfather), was rather anachronistic. His pure ideological voice is clearly that of Bartov rather than that of a plausible, realistically portrayed person.

Similarly, it is hard to believe that most American Jewish families of 1963 resembled the Cowan family in *A Happy Evening*, or that most parents of young American olim are as supercilious, narrow and buffoonish as Marvin and Pearl Goldsmith. What is less difficult to see is the usefulness and necessity of maintaining these stereotypes for the continuation of nationalist polemics which each of the playwrights puts forth. Fully fleshed-out characters, more accurately representing American Jewish realities, would have been more difficult to use. Indeed, as was the case with early socialist and social realism, the genre can ill afford to breathe life and pathos into its characters while at the same time maintaining its ideological purity.

The point need not be labored then, that none of these three plays represent the best of 1960's Israeli drama. Neither are any of them of major import in the development of the art form in that country. Yet, as they are works by three very prominent playwrights, they are not wholly insignificant. Especially this is the case as some new themes are present in them which do not previously appear. Moreover, the commentary they make upon American Jewish life is not only consonant with the overall portrait of American Jewry painted on Israeli stages but with the intellectual spirit of Israel in the 1960's.

Especially in the plays by Bartov and Meged, there is a restatement of the same fear commonly stated in plays of the fifties; Israel is losing track of its original mission. Desire for personal comfort has caused some Israelis (Jonathan and his wife), even to abandon the country. Outside of Israel they quickly lose all connection to their Jewish souls. The only hope for them -- and for the American Jews who surround them -- is aliyah, in the ideal case, to a kibbutz or a moshav.

In all three plays America is painted as a place of incredible wealth. Like the Silvers of Beilin's *Return of the Sons*, the Goldsmiths have unlimited amounts of money with which to bribe the idealistically pure kibbutznikim. Similarly, Mr. Lincoln Fox of Bartov's play quite easily offers four million dollars to Meshullam's moshav if he will only keep his terrible secret. In each case, the two-faced American capitalists are sent on their way.

Yet the attainment of money has cost these American Jews dearly. Marvin and Pearl Goldsmith are pathetic, nouveau riche creatures enchanted with their own self-importance, but unable to change a flat tire. Marshall Cowan has attained his wealth through the basest of means, and

it is only his gentile partner who prevents him from sinking any lower. Mr. Fox too, has only been able to achieve the success he enjoys by hiding his identity and living a massive lie. All the American Jewish characters in these plays (like those of the thirties and forties), make their livings by selling what appear to be (at least in the minds of the playwrights), somewhat frivolous objects. But perhaps the most villainous of all is Bartov's Mr. Fox, whose wares (television programs), are poison to the mind.

This minor point is nonetheless common to two of the plays discussed in this chapter. In *Go Home, Jonathan!*, television is shown as an insipid noisebox, which prevents meaningful conversations from taking place. Mossinson gives this American medium a similar treatment. It ought to be remembered that television in Israel only appeared after the Six Day War. Perhaps the minor diatribes made by the two playwrights are the natural defensiveness of men who feel threatened by the inevitable advent of the medium in Israel, where indeed (as attendance figures have shown), theater would be faced by competition for the first time.

Summary and Conclusions

In the sixties, Israeli drama diverged into several distinct paths. Some plays took as their themes biblical or other historical facts, but unlike their predecessors, transformed the stories into more universal dramas. A minority were of a more adventurous nature, being either absurdist, expressionist or (as some critics call them) "existentialist." A third stream -- of realism, or sometimes "poetic realism" -- was more directly the continuation of previous Israeli dramatic tradition. This

included plays such as *Go Home*, *Jonathan!*, *A Happy Evening on Park Avenue*, and *Goldsmith and Son*. All three are rather timid, conservative attempts at social commentary.

Of the three, only Bartov's *Go Home* shows any innovation. His clever use of "the fifth" is a tour de force of dramaturgical skill. His use of language -- contrasting the artificial "Diplomatese" of the U.N. delegates to the earthy and honest speech of the old chalutz, his ability to show characters speaking in foreign languages, yet in a way that the audience knows what is going on -- is rather brilliant. If his message is highly conventional, at least his dramatic skills show some wit.

Again, of the three plays, only Bartov's offers a genuinely new angle on Israeli society and Israeli-American relations. As in Meged's play, the only real use for American Jews is either as contributors to the U.J.A. or (ideally) as potential olim. In both, it is the younger American generation which is looked towards for the latter function. What Bartov's play does offer, and that which it centrally concerns, is a critique of Israeli foreign relations. Not only has the Shneirson family been destroyed by Israel's over-concern with "world-opinion," but Israel itself would be best to simply ignore it. It is also suggested - perhaps for the first time - that American Jewish philanthropists can also be safely ignored.

Other themes, such as the racism of American Society, the mentality of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste, the invidiousness of American television, the obsessive-compulsive manner in which American Jews pursue wealth, and their inability to do manual labor are common in these plays. Again (as in plays of earlier periods), we hear the playwrights preaching the traditional values of self-sacrifice, communal rather than private good and ideological purity. And again, as in any work which is so ostensibly polemic, this is achieved at a high artistic cost.

At the same time, there is less than an entirely univocal voice in the three plays. Meged, again (as noted by Shoham), preaches a return to the ideological purity of communal life, which he sees as the core of the Israeli national soul. Bartov too preaches the same values, but is also able to make some insightful commentary on American life (perhaps because of his first-hand experience in this country), especially on the persistent American racial problem. Mossinson, the most vitriolic of all, goes off in his own direction; his hatred for diaspora Jewry is so intense that his play can best be described as a sermon for the already converted.

Though we do see in the three plays a diversity of opinion not found in other earlier works in the social-realist genre, it is remarkable -- especially in a period which was otherwise marked by a high degree of dramaturgical experimentation -- to find how little is new in them. The same stock characters which appeared in pre-Independence Israeli drama are revitalized in each of these plays, which shows a stagnation otherwise absent in contemporaneous Israeli theater.

In sum then, the three plays are rather disappointing. While there is a greater sense of the individual in them, their American Jewish figures are still the one-dimensional stock-figures so commonly found in earlier works. As such, the American Jews in these plays are mere symbols, and it is as unlikely as ever to find a realistic portrait in a character which is so ostensibly an idea rather than flesh and blood.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V:

1. My own translation. It is not precisely known what "the language of Judea" referred to by the Prophet was, though it is commonly assumed to be Hebrew, though at that point there must have been some admixture of Aramaic in their speech. In any case, the Israeli playwrights considered here share with Nehemiah the same view: Jews ought to speak in their unique national language.
2. Hebrew title: אכזר מכל המלך
3. Hebrew title: מלחמת בני האור בבני החשך
4. Hebrew title: בראשית
5. My remarks on Genesis taken largely from Abramson, Modern Hebrew Drama. pp. 93-100.
6. Hebrew title: נסע לננוה
7. See for example the poetry in his recently translated Amen (trans. by the author and Ted Hughes). Harper and Row, New York. 1977. Especially "Song to a Friend", (pp. 64-65), and "Sometimes I'm Very Happy and Desperate" (p. 76).
8. Abramson discusses the play at great length, citing a multitude of interpretations, Modern Hebrew Drama. pp. 100-115.
9. Also known as The Burning Season, which is the more literal translation of the Hebrew title: העונה הבורעת
10. Hebrew title: השרד והמלך
11. Hebrew title: בעלת הארמון Available in translation by Richard Flantz and the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature - World Zionist Organization, The Lady of the Castle, New York, 1974.
12. Ibid. (Introduction by Matti Meged). Also see Abramson's extended discussion in Modern Hebrew Drama, pp. 116-125. (Abramson translates the play's title as The Chatelaine.) She sees the play as a landmark: p. 125:

While the play's major concern is at face value an Ibsenite one, to challenge the apparent truth and destroy the ghosts of the past, the levels of exposition are vastly different in Ibsen's plays and in this one. Moreover Leah Goldberg has a positive solution to Lena's (the chatelaine) unique problem and a message for the audience which was particularly appropriate at the time. Ibsen offers no such solutions.

13. Hebrew title: לדי העל
14. Ofrat, Gideon. The Israeli Drama. (See Bibliography for complete entry in Hebrew). pp. 94-103.
15. Hebrew title: הרומח והרוח (Also known as The Inn of Spirits), displaying the ambiguity of the Hebrew רוח.
16. Ofrat, op.cit. p. 92.
17. Ibid.
18. As reported in Kohansky, The Hebrew Theatre, pp. 179-181: Audiences seemed rather confused by Sartre's No Exit. But as it had been performed almost everywhere in the civilised world, Israelis felt compelled to give the genre a try. On the other hand, the small Zita Theater's attempt the following year to stage Beckett's Waiting for Godot was met with profound confusion. Both the critics and the public seemed utterly unable either to follow the plot or to make much sense of the production.
19. Ofrat, op.cit. (Ofrat gives this as a title for the chapter. At the same time he considers these plays to be products of neither period. Rather, they are in between the styles of the two decades.)
20. Hebrew title: סע הביתה יונתן
21. Hebrew title: שני כנפים לאחד
22. Hebrew title: 4 ישראליים וכל אמריקה
23. The word "negro" rather than the more current "black" or "Afrogenic" etc. is used to convey the author's intent. It would be anachronistic to make such a translation, as the author clearly meant (in 1961) "negroes", as was the usage at the time.
24. Again, my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Bartov for entrusting one of the only two extant mimeograph copies of this play to me.
25. "machers": Yiddish with English plural; "big-shots."
26. Hebrew title unavailable: all information on A Happy Evening is taken from Abramson, Modern Hebrew Drama.
27. Abramson, op.cit. p. 77.
28. Several letters were sent to Mr. Mossinson's listed address in Haifa, but were returned by the Post Office. He very well may be on an extended absence from the country.

29. Abramson, op.cit.
30. Ibid. p. 78.
31. Ibid.
32. Hebrew title: גלדשמידה וזנר Available in both Hebrew and English translation only in mimeograph, unbound manuscript at Zionist Archives, 515 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y.
33. The English version is undated. Hebrew dated 1965.

CHAPTER VI

Life in the Diaspora is Antithetical to Judaism:Three Representative Plays of the 1970's.

The Jewish people, in all its religious expression and existence has rejected the golah as a permanent possibility for continued Jewish existence and has dismissed it as being internally self-negating. Judaism has never given legitimacy to the golah. On the contrary, the golah has been thought of in the mind of the people as a disaster, a curse, a degradation, as the root of all evil, and certainly as temporary....The world shall not be made whole until the entire Jewish people returns to its homeland.¹

- A. B. Yehoshua

By the end of the 1960's, Israeli drama had reached a point of artistic maturity unknown in earlier eras. A steady exposure to the avant-garde playwrights of both Europe and the United States as well as home-grown experimentation had finally resulted in a more sophisticated attitude among both Israeli critics and the general public. In this atmosphere, which was marked by an openness not only to newer and bolder forms of dramaturgy but of ideology, it is not surprising to find a less univocal attitude towards Diaspora, and particularly American Jewry than had been encountered in the past. Similarly, the number of Israeli plays which deal directly and concretely with the subject began to decline, as Israeli playwrights began in earnest to address the more universal human problems, albeit with a specifically Israeli perspective.

Unlike those of previous decades, the works of Israeli play-

wrights after roughly 1970 cannot so easily be categorized. In previous chapters, we have seen a certain uniformity in the plays, mainly because the various playwrights belong(ed) to definite artistic and ideological "schools". If anything, the 1970's were marked by a previously unknown outpouring of highly individualistic expression, and thus it is difficult to detect a uniform ideological direction in the corpus of post-1970 Israeli drama as a whole. This being the case, the present chapter centers on a single play which typifies that new direction. Only in relation to it are two less important, less innovative plays discussed.

A. B. Yehoshua's *Last Treatments*²

Unlike any of the previously discussed playwrights, A. B. Yehoshua is a sixth generation Israeli, born in Jerusalem in 1936. He studied in both Israel and abroad, receiving his Master's degree from the Sorbonne in French Literature. Ever since the first publication of one of his stories in 1957, Yehoshua has acquired a very important place in Israeli literature. Among his better known works are a novella, *In the Beginning of Summer 1970* (1972)³ and a play, *A Night in May*⁴ (produced and published in 1969), and his novel, *The Lover* (1978)⁵. Many of his stories have been translated into English and other foreign languages, among which "Three Days and a Child" is well respected. The latter was made into a feature-length film in the mid-1970's.⁶

Last Treatments was first produced by the Haifa Municipal Theatre in August, 1973. Typical of Yehoshua's other prose and dramatic works, the play is an extended psycho-drama in which the boundaries between reality and imagination are purposely obscured. While Yehoshua's Zionism underlies the play, it is very much more oblique in its references than previous polemics.

Synopsis. The play is in three short acts. All the action takes place in the parlor and office of Mr. and Mrs. Herman's house, which is located in an unspecified Israeli city. All action takes place within twenty-four hours, extending into the early morning hours of the next day. There are six characters in the play:

Mr. Herman -- a man of about sixty-five years of age.

Dr. Herman - his wife, a psychoanalyst, about sixty.

Mr. Shatz - an old patient of Dr. Herman, about 50.

Yonatan Rothman - a young man of about 20.

Ann - An American student, about 20.

A Clerk - sent by the University

The play opens as Mr. Herman, a retired bookseller, decides to remove all traces of the past from his house. In a frenzy of activity he unloads all the many shelves of old books in the parlor, planning to donate them to the University. He has summoned a clerk from the University to inspect the books, and is inexplicably upset when the clerk informs him that the University Library may not have time to take all the books until the next day. Dr. Herman allows her husband to carry on his eccentricity by himself, and disappears, only to return in the last act.

Mr. Herman's efforts are frustrated at every turn. The vast treasure-house of literature on his shelves vexes him; he wishes to disassociate himself from both his personal and cultural past by giving the books away. Those which the University rejects he will simply throw away. The University Library -- here, the symbol of the ubiquitous Israeli bureaucracy -- has a tight and pre-planned schedule to maintain, and is unwilling to adapt to Herman's sudden desire.

His single-minded activity is constantly interrupted by a procession of unwanted visitors. First, Mr. Shatz, an old patient of Dr. Herman (who has just retired from her long-standing psychotherapeutic practice), shows up. Though Herman implores Shatz that his wife will no longer see any of the old patients, Shatz insists on remaining in Dr. Herman's study until her return. He rejects all referrals to other analysts, insisting upon hearing his final rejection from the doctor's own mouth. It turns out that Shatz was the doctor's first patient when the Herman's had just come to Israel and were rather destitute. Herman is not only annoyed at Shatz's persistence (which keeps him from his goal of ridding the house of its books), but with Shatz himself. The old patient stirs up all sorts of unwanted memories of the Hermans' slow and painful adjustment to the new land and its people. He also evokes a tinge of jealousy in Mr. Herman, as he reminds him of the countless hours that he and the doctor spent alone in her study.

Shatz is not the only unwanted guest. As he lies sleeping on the sofa, recovering from an anxiety attack, two strangers appear. Yonatan Rothman, a young Israeli who -- as he reminds Mr. Herman -- had been a neighbor for many years, arrives with a strange companion. Covered with mud and dust, the two young people, Yonatan and Ann, stand at the Herman's door also seeking to consult with the doctor. While neither had ever been a patient of Dr. Herman, Yonatan assures Mr. Herman that she is the only one who can help. When Herman doesn't even allow the two to enter, they wait patiently outside for as long as it will take for Mrs. Herman to return.

Ann is a strange character about whom we learn very little. She stands utterly mute, as Yonatan explains that she understands but does not speak Hebrew. But her muteness goes beyond her language difficulties.

She stares vacantly into space, a glazed look in her eyes, as if in the throes of a barbiturate overdose (though, as we find out, that is not her problem). Yonatan explains that he knows her only casually, and found her in her present semi-catatonic state in the city where he goes to college. Because she was afraid to ride the bus, the two have spent several days walking the breadth of Israel to arrive at Dr. Herman's office. Again, just like Shatz, Yonatan is convinced that only Dr. Herman can help her. Others have advised the pathetic young girl to return to the United States, but Yonatan is confident that even a few minutes with Dr. Herman will snap her out of her present pitiful state.

Mr. Herman is beside himself in utter frustration. The past (as symbolized both by his books and by Mr. Shatz), just won't go away. It is unexorcisable. Added to this are the modern problems of alienation and lack of direction in the contemporary State (personified by Yonatan), and the persistent, nagging image of his roots in the golah, personified by Ann. All of these Mr. Herman has tried to evade, hiding in his personal fortress, out of which he endeavors to prevent the entry of any of these problems. But the patients and books hang on like a bad dream, at least until the return of the book-clerk and Dr. Herman. Both finally do return in the last act, which takes place late in the evening.

Mr. Herman had thought his wife to be on a few errands downtown, but as it turns out, she has spent the day taking bus rides all over the country which she has never really seen. Her life has been exclusively in the city and for the first time that day, she has seen the outlying regions. She shows a great deal of patience towards her nearly-crazed husband, but insists on seeing the unexpected visitors.

Shatz, it is revealed, had at one point been an almost hopeless case. Exhibiting many classic Freudian symptoms -- vertigo, agoraphobia and other severe disabilities -- only after many years had Dr. Herman been able to assist him to join the mainstream of Israeli life. Now, however, the old devices, the simple cures no longer work. After many years as a productive member of society, Shatz has experienced a new and more severe breakdown. He seeks to discuss anew all the haunting dreams and delusions which first drove him to Dr. Herman's couch. Though at first reticent, Dr. Herman in a very maternal manner agrees to see him. She however, seems as much in need of help as he.

She is unaware of the presence of the two young people who wait patiently in the other room. Herman had previously, in a sudden display of pity, allowed the two to enter on condition that they leave immediately upon the doctor's return. In the room, however, he has left what he thought to be an antique, non-functional gun. At the end of the play, to everyone's shock, they find the young girl has shot herself.

By the end of the play, it is difficult to discern who is the doctor and who are the patients. The intellectual challenges brought on by Shatz and Yonatan overwhelm both Dr. and Mr. Herman. Strangely enough, for a while it seemed that Mr. Herman, for all his rudeness and impatience, had made some connection with the pathetic girl. But perhaps out of subconscious desire to rid himself of all memory of his own diaspora origins, he has provided the girl with the opportunity to end her suffering. Further discussion of *Last Treatments* is found after the following brief sections.

Two other plays of the early 1970's are representative both of the artistic atmosphere of Israel of the time and its playwrights' attitude towards the golah, particularly its American manifestation. They are discussed in capsule form below.

Aryeh Chen's *Virgo*⁷

Aryeh Chen, like Yehoshua, is one of the emerging new native-born Israeli playwrights, rather than a member of one of the older ideological and artistic schools. A previous play, *Journey Into Light*⁸ (Haifa Municipal Theatre 1969) won second prize in a major Israeli competition. It met with great critical reception and was published in Bama in 1970.⁹ *Virgo* was awarded first prize in the National Plays Contest in 1970, sponsored by the Israel Arts Council. It was produced for the first time by Habima in 1972. *Virgo* is the only play discussed at any length in this study available in English translation.

Synopsis. The play takes place on the eve of Yom Ha-Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day), in 1968. The three characters are all Israelis, but two of them (Amnon and Yael/Jill) have been living in the United States for many years. The plot reveals that back in 1948, the three of them, and a fourth, deceased character, had all been close friends. The two women, Dinah and Yael (who now calls herself Jill), had interchangeably dated Amnon and a close friend who had also been in the army. It was only by chance that Yael married Amnon instead of the other soldier, who died in an act of heroism in the War of Liberation. There is still some attraction left between Amnon and Dinah.

Amnon and Yael left Israel shortly after Independence. Settling in New Jersey, he was transformed from heroic freedom-fighter to bra

manufacturer. He and Yael are incredibly wealthy yet they have their problems; Jill is an alcoholic unable to cope with life. Their only daughter Debbie, in Amnon's words, (Act One):

....has been running around in Europe for six months with a talented young black man...Hippie education.

Life in America has destroyed not only the Goldman family but their

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menschlichkeit Amnon is supercilious to everyone he meets, especially to members of the working class. As he orders a taxi over the telephone he says:

... Hello? This is Mister Goldman speaking. From America. I need a car right away. I'll pay in dollars. A dollar for every lousy pound of yours...No, I haven't any work for you in America. I hate expatriates. But I'll give you a good job in the factory I'm setting up here if you'll send me a taxi at once...Happy holiday, chump!

Most of the dialogue and pathos in the play revolves around the disclosure of how life in America has robbed both Amnon and Yael of all their previous virtues. Once, the two were young idealists fighting with the Palmach, vibrant and alive. Now they are pathetic, middle-aged people who have no control over their daughter. They are racked by guilt over their veridah, though they only admit it towards the end of the play. As the three characters probe the past, painfully contrasting it with the present, Amnon does the only sensible thing; his underlying guilt compels him to jump out the window of the house into the turbulent sea below. Just as Dinah's Palmach lover died so long ago (diving on a live grenade), now Yael will have to come to grips with the unavoidable claims of duty and national responsibility which she has avoided all these years.

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Israel Shtandall's Aliza

Shtandall is a lesser-known author of several published works

who also uses the pen name of Sanya. *Aliza* is his only published play.¹²

Synopsis. The play takes place in present day (1970) Tel-Aviv. An extended circle of Israeli intellectuals, bored with the insularity of Israeli culture and its severely limited scope, spend their considerable leisure time impressing each other with their knowledge of European cultures, art forms and languages. The play's chief concern is the growing feeling of cultural inferiority in Israel; as it turns out, those who complain loudest about the smallness of Israeli culture are in fact the cause of the problem to begin with.

The central characters are the small literary clique which gathers in each others' living rooms and in restaurants of tourist hotels. Mr. and Mrs. Herman and company liberally lace their speech with quotations from the French, German and Italian literary classics. They pause only occasionally to insult waiters, maids and other members of the working class. *Aliza* (the title role), is made fun of relentlessly in these social gatherings, but (as is revealed in the last of the three acts), she has alternately been the mistress of every man in this effete circle.

Aliza is a new immigrant from an unspecified underdeveloped country who, for lack of other choices, has become the Herman's live-in maid. While Mr. Herman publicly insults her lack of sophistication, his nocturnal protestations of love for his maid reveal his true hypocritical and superficial character. He, like others of his so-called friends, implore *Aliza* for sexual favors. In return they promise to run away with her, to start life anew. This, as *Aliza* fully realizes, is purely a figment of the men's imaginations. Each in turn, when pressed to fulfill the bargain, fails to live up to his commitment.

The play is largely a criticism of Israeli upper-middle class life. The literati are apologetic about Israel and walk in the shadow of the European masters. They are portrayed as foolish, having tried to transplant European culture in the Middle Eastern soil of Israel. The older generation does not understand the brute fact that Israel is firmly in the Levant, and that the old ways simply are not suited to the new life therein.

In contrast to this circle are several younger Israelis. In a shallow display of cultural patriotism, they shun the diaspora culture which their parents worship, rejecting it as the products of that sad part of Jewish history. But for all their bravado, in the end they are shown to be equally possessed by the same cultural inferiority complex as their parents. One of them wants to go to Europe for academic studies unavailable in the small parochial state. Another's complaint is more concrete; Israeli women are sexually unexperimental and do not satisfy his exotic tastes.

Much to the point of this study is a peripheral character, Joe. He describes himself as a beatnik and seems to represent the European Left. Through most of the play he sits on the sidelines, making acerbic commentaries on the bourgeois life-styles and aspirations of the others. Yet he has little to do with the recognizable mainstream American Left of the late 1960's:

We, the beatniks, hate peace. For peace is mud. We love war, revolution, upheaval, for that is the true way of life! We are ready to fight against the Capitalist world, the Imperialists and first and foremost against America.... but between man and woman, we choose peace!

Joe is primarily a foil against which aspects of the other characters are developed. He unobtrusively sits in the corner, strumming his

guitar, singing political ditties and chiding the others for their pretentiousness and limited, "incorrect world-view". He represents radical European politics at their most vitriolic. As such a symbol, he vilifies the Israelis for aping European culture and, more so, for their imitation of American middle-class life styles. He derides America and its culture as being salacious and on the verge of self-destruction. Israel, if it is to survive, must abandon the western model of progress and instead follow the path of pure socialism.

In the end, however, this pristine figure is seen to be as fallible as all the others. He too tries to seduce Aliza, but is turned down. She alone, in a naive but truthful understanding of human nature sees that ideologies and cultural affectations are mere masks which can be put on and taken off at will. The true worth of individuals lies beyond intellectual categorization. She, the heroine of the play, rejects her suitors' plans for yeridah to a variety of western countries and leaves the Herman's stern employ. Without the intellectual affections and superficial adornments of the other characters, she alone recognizes that life is more complicated than theory can explain. Her good nature and hard-working spirit compel her to abandon this circle of hypocrites, both young and old, and to be satisfied with her life as a simple but happy worker in the developing Israeli economy.

An Analysis of the Three Plays

Though the three plays have seemingly disparate themes, all address problems not present in earlier plays. The individual, his or her struggle to adjust to the demands of life, and his transcendence of the narrow boundaries of ideology are common to *Aliza* and *Last Treatments*. While *Virgo* is more pedantic and didactic than the other two -- being

an extended sermon against veridah -- it too portrays individuals rather than ideas. It attacks yordim not as symbols, or as evil stock-figures. Rather, the two Israelis who have lived for so long in America are shown to be pathetic, life-denying creatures. Whereas Meged, in *I Like Mike* inveighs against veridah as being unpatriotic, Chen tells his audience that the primary reason to stay in Israel is that veridah will destroy their souls. These yordim have paid a high price for their material success and are ultimately miserable. Unlike the prodigal sons of *Banim L'gvulam*, these sad products of the golah are beyond repair, and thus the play ends with a death rather than a rehabilitation.

Aliza too is clearly more mature as dramaturgy than earlier polemic works. The various characters are still symbols as in previous plays, but now they stand for types of people rather than ideologies. It is not so much the ideologies the two generations of Israelis profess which makes them pathetic. Rather, it is their failure as individuals, their inability to deal with each other honestly, which marks all of them.

This too is a dominant theme in *Last Treatments* which is assuredly the best of the three plays. Yehoshua's uses of the basic dramatic tools are among the best examples in Israeli drama. Anat Feinberg pointed to his superb use of symbolic pieces of scenery, such as the tree branch that grows wildly and unpruned into the Herman's living room, calling it an "Ionescian function of objects".¹³ Most important though are the relationships, (or lack thereof) which the Herman's fail to establish with those in need. She writes:

The 'treatments' are hard and in a way futile because of the lack of human consideration. Nothing like what Buber called the 'I-Thou relationship' is established.¹⁴

In a less subtle manner, this is also the point in *Aliza*. Therein

the characters treat each other as spokesmen for ideas rather than as flesh and blood human beings. They are betrayed by their animal desires for the young house-servant who alone perceives the true nature of the human predicament. She sees through their shallowness recognizing that they treat her (as they do each other), in an "I-It" rather than an "I-Thou" fashion. Unschooled and unlettered as she is, she alone is in touch with her feelings sufficiently to detect sincerity and to reject pretentiousness.

In essence, this is a theme of all three plays. *Virgo's yordim* are self-agrandizing materialists (as in earlier plays), still bearing the marks of caricature rather than character. But their disintegration on stage, as the guilt built up over thirty years takes its toll, makes the viewer pity rather than mock them. Similarly, none of the figures in *Last Treatments* are ostensibly evil, nor are they stereotypes. They are invested with the alienation and loneliness inherent in all modern societies, though flavored with the specifically Israeli manifestation thereof. The problems they encounter are caused not only by Israel and its historical troubles but by internal denial. As Anat Feinberg writes:

Mr. Herman symbolizes those who want to dispose of the past. Shatz embodies the other extreme: his present existence is justified by the past.¹⁵

While *Virgo* and *Aliza* only make sense in an Israeli context, *Last Treatments* is a genuinely universal play. This by itself does not make it a better piece of drama, but overall, Yehoshua frees himself from making a specifically polemical point. On the other hand, he cannot help but to reveal his ideological perspective, which is apparent in his treatment of Ann, the American student.

Summary and Conclusions

Just as the strength of these and other representative Israeli plays of the 1970's rests upon their departure from previously constraining ideological perspectives, it is rather difficult to generalize from them. Less can be abstracted from them as to their views of American Jewry than in works of earlier periods, as the plays deal more with individuals than ideas. Yet a trend might be detected.

Though it is only a secondary point, all three plays have as an underlying assumption that Jewish life in America is all but dead. In *Virgo* it is demonstrated how even the idealist Palmach-fighter, the comrade of an Israeli martyr can be corrupted by American society and its rampant, hedonistic materialism to the point where he is unrecognizable. He who labored for Jewish survival in 1948 is now, in 1968, a pathetic ghost of his former self. Racked with guilt over his yeridah, and plagued by his wife's alcoholism and his daughter's affection for black men, he is the prodigal son who returns too late. He is beyond salvation, and death is the only possible end for his misguided life.

Aliza deals with the point at hand only peripherally. No specific comment is made on American Jewish life, but Israelis' longing for the more complex and sophisticated artistic and intellectual fruits of the golah are portrayed as a snare. Real meaning in life is as easily found among the simple folk of the Levant as among the higher cultural traditions of Europe. America, as is portrayed by both the "intellectuals" in the play as well as Joe (the "beatnik"), is a land of cultural philistines who are to be pitied, not envied.

The most important of the three, *Last Treatments* reveals Yehoshua's ideological perspective on the diaspora in an off-hand way. While this is clearly spelled out in his recent book *Between Right and Right*,¹⁶ it is only alluded to in *Last Treatments*. His commentary on the value of American Jewish life is made en passant, and is perhaps most telling of all.

His choice of Ann as the most pathetic patient, reaching out for the help of Dr. Herman, tells us something of Yehoshua's hierarchy of mental disabilities. The other patient, Shatz, is clearly also in need of help, unable to adjust to new realities. Yet he is clearly salvageable. If others are willing to see him as an individual, to meet him on his own terms, he can eventually be restored to health.

Ann, on the other hand, is a total "basket-case." Though Yonatan takes a personal interest in her, though even Mr. Herman shows some empathy with her, she is beyond help. Cut off from her real roots -- Israel and Zionism -- she has lived too long in the golah. She is utterly passive, being led by the hand of outgoing Israelis who try to guide her, but she is unable to do anything on her own. She understands but does not speak Hebrew. The sole act she performs in the play of her own volition is the ultimate denial of self-worth and the affirmation of Yehoshua's philosophy. She shoots herself -- perhaps purposely, perhaps by accident -- but her death is at her own hands nonetheless.

It is no accident that Yehoshua chose a young American student for this role, for his assessment of the golah is entirely negative. The most developed essay in his recent book is indeed titled, *The Golah -- The Neurotic Solution*.¹⁷ Therein he shows that it is the normal state of affairs for a people to view its land as "mother" and its god as

"father." Diaspora Judaism is inherently neurotic as it has failed to discern the imbalance; cut off from its "motherland", it has projected feminine qualities onto its God. The masculine image of אלהים as father, without the counterbalance of "motherland" leads inevitably to mass psychological illness among Jews of the golah.

Similarly, in the final essay of his book, Yehoshua points out that Jews, before the rise of modern Zionism at least, and persisting among those who continue to live in the golah, have insisted on remaining a marginal group. Not only this, but they have been marginal as an historical force. Only in Israel, Yehoshua claims, wherein the Jew regains his or her psychological health, does the Jew step out of the
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sidelines and into the main arena of history.

As a theatrical symbol, Ann represents these neurotic tendencies which the playwright ascribes to all Jews of the golah. While her psychological malady is unstated, she is clearly in a severe state of melancholia. When accidentally presented with the opportunity, she perpetrates the ultimate act of self-hatred, killing herself. If depression can be defined as anger turned inwards upon the self, she is the quintessential illustration of the syndrome. The inherent neurosis of the Jewish t'futzah existence, once laid bare is fatal. Ann's realization of her rootlessness leads to anger; this in turn leads to hatred of the present. Unable to cope with the conflict, she resolves her internal struggle by suicide.

Yehoshua is not alone in this point of view. In a play of the same year, another rising star of Israel's stages makes much the same
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point. *Difficult People*, by Yosef Bar-Yosef deals with four rather anonymous people living in an unspecified English city. Only incidentally do we find out the Jewish identities of several of them. The

play is not specifically Israeli or Jewish at all, but more than one critic has seen in it the same theme as in Yehoshua's *Last Treatments*.²⁰ Cut off from one's physical roots--here, Jews outside their land--the individual is easily lost, having no direction in life.

Similarly, a recently translated novel by one of the best known exemplars of the "Canaanite" school has the same theme. Benjamin Tammuz's *Minatour*²¹ has as its non-hero an Israeli undercover agent. Living in a variety of European countries, he has for years been unable and forbidden to form meaningful relationships with other people. One day, he is finally overcome by his need for relationship, and launches a letter-writing love affair with a young girl whom he sees on the bus. As we suspect at the beginning, the relationship is doomed. The story is told from five distinct points of view, yet in all of them we get the same impression; the spy has expended so much energy in hiding his identity over the years that he is now incapable of self-disclosure. Cut off for too long from his land -- where, not so incidentally, he never really felt a part -- he is an alien everywhere he goes. All that has been wrong with corporate Jewish existence in the diaspora is internalized in the spy. When his need for human contact and relationship finally impel him to establish a relationship, he loses his espionage skills and is gunned down.

In these works, as well as the three plays discussed in some length in this chapter, no single theme is dominant as in previous decades. The easy solutions to complex human problems which were presented in the works of the Palmach generation no longer work. As Shaked writes,²² those works were marked by a feeling of "first-person plural": the heroes of that generation were not individuals, but the group. A common ideology

united people which was no longer present by the mid-sixties. As

Nurith Gertz writes:

The most conspicuous difference between the literature of the Palmach generation and that beginning to be written in the sixties is the lack of a common values center. There is no longer an obvious world of values in which the various speakers in the literary world believe, or to which they give their support, acting in its name. The participants in the work are therefore isolated from each other ideologically, socially and personally.²³

This trend continued in the seventies, to the present day. Especially in *Last Treatments* is this flowering of individualism felt, but it is present in all three plays. Yet it is remarkable how much the individual authors agree upon fundamentals. If a common thread unites them all it is this; Jewish life outside of the Jewish State leads to psychological illness. For Chen, it means a lack of identity -- a betrayal of ideology. For Shtandall such a life or aspirations for such a life brings with it a superficiality which prevents true human relationship. For Yehoshua, such a life is simply impossible. It is inherently defective and will soon die of its own malaise. And as Yehoshua makes clear in his latter polemics, the very idea of healthy Jewish existence outside the State -- perhaps in America specifically -- is self-contradictory.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VI:

1. א.ב. יהושע. בזכות הנורמליות, ע" 40.
(My own translation; citation from Hebrew original, not the recently published Between Right and Right, Arnold Schwartz trans. Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1981.)
2. Hebrew title: סיפורים אחרונים
3. Hebrew title: בתחילת קיץ 1970
4. Hebrew title: לילה בפאז
5. Hebrew title: המאהב
6. Biographical information on Abraham B. Yehoshua primarily taken from Matti Mehed's introduction to the English translation of A Night in May (Miriam Arad, translator). Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature - World Zionist Organization, Tel-Aviv, 1974. pp. v-viii.
7. Hebrew title: מול בסולה (Chen's name is spelled differently in the translated version because a different transliteration system is used. See Bibliography for complete Hebrew entry.)
8. Hebrew title: מבט אל הארץ
9. Bama #46
10. menschlichkeit: Yiddish, meaning roughly "humanity" or "manner of dealing with other people." (דרך-ארץ)
11. Hebrew title: עליזה
12. At least as of 1970. The book lists four previous works by the author. There are no further listings of his works in Kiryat Sefer.
13. Feinberg, Anat. "A.B. Yehoshua as Playwright", in Modern Hebrew Literature. Vol. I #1. Spring, 1975. p. 44.
14. Ibid. p. 47
15. Ibid. p. 46
16. Hebrew title: בזכות הנורמליות (Between Right and Right is not a literal translation of the Hebrew to which "A Normal Identity" would be closer.) See Bibliography for complete Hebrew entry.
17. Hebrew title of the essay: "הגולה-הפחדון הנברותי"

18.

בזכות הנורמליות, ע" 143

19. In his introduction to the translated version, Matti Meged compares the play stylistically with those of Aloni, Hanoch Levin and A.B. Yehoshua. Ideologically however, it is akin to a play of a much earlier era by the renowned Y.H. Brenner. Meged writes (pp. x-xi):

Both of them "reveal" what is unique in the Jewish existential condition: the special colour of the loneliness of a Jewish man or woman growing old in a foreign land and, against their wills, or beyond their knowledge, seeking the remedy for their lives ...by means of a contact of some sort with the land of Israel...Despite the great distance in time, in place and atmosphere, the ear picks up a kind of tone that is similar: the tone of a voice of miserable, isolated Jews vainly seeking a remedy.

20. Cf. the discussions in Meged's introduction to Difficult People and James Diamond's article "The Israeli Writer as Psychotherapist", in Judaism Vol. 32, #2. 1979. pp. 95-102.
21. Tammuz, Benjamin. Minatour. (Kin Parfitt and Mildred Budny, translators.) New American Library, New York, 1981.
22. Shaked, Gershon. "First Person Plural -- Literature of the 1948 Generation" in Jerusalem Quarterly #22. Winter, 1982. pp. 105-119.
23. Gertz, Nurith. "Changes in Hebrew Literature: The Transition from the Palmach Generation to the Generation of the Sixties", in Ha-Sifrut #29. December, 1979. pp. 69-75. Quote taken from English summary.

CHAPTER VII - CONCLUSIONS

From its infancy in the pre-Independence era, continuing through the 1950's and persisting (at least in the works of several important playwrights), into the sixties, modern Israeli drama was seen both by its creators and its audience primarily as an instrument for social change, education and motivation rather than as a vehicle for personal expression. Though this was also true of other forms of literature in Israel both before and after the creation of the State, drama, by its very public nature, was consistently enlisted in the ongoing struggle for a national identity.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the image of American Jewry on the stages of both the yishuv and later, the State, were by and large drawn in stereotypes. Especially in the formative years immediately before the creation of the State, dramatists created characters which were utterly one-dimensional. They were caricatures rather than plausible individuals. This applies to all figures which appear in the overwhelming majority of these plays.

As a stereotypical character, the tendency in the thirties and forties was for the American Jew to represent bourgeois capitalism in all its smallness. Ashman and Beilin chose, among all the Jews of the t'futzah, the American Jew -- especially as wealthy tourists in a land of physical hardship -- to embody the decadence of the nouveau riche. The portraits they paint are not meant to be believable portrayals of real people, and must be accepted on their own terms.

In the 1950's, the ideological setting of the new State had been established. To the chagrin of party-line socialists and communists, Israel -- as friend and client of the United States -- chose a western rather than eastern bloc economic model for its future. Similarly, much to the consternation of many of Israel's literary luminaries, Israeli culture pursued European and American ideals rather than those of the Middle East. In severe reaction to this tendency arose a school of authors and intellectuals not discussed in this thesis, the so-called "Canaanite" writers. Even among mainstream authors and intellectuals though, there ensued reservation as to the extent to which sphardic and mizrachi culture were being subsumed. This is well documented by Naomi Fischman.¹

Two plays of the fifties, by Aharon Meged and Mordecai Bernstein respectively, are typical of reformist social commentary plays of that decade. They, and many others, tried to alert the Israeli public to the speed at which Israel seemed to be abandoning the pristine values of its founders. Like others of the era, *I Like Mike* and *A Private Secretary* have as their targets the pettiness of Israel's urban middle class and the octopus-like manner in which the growing civilian bureaucracy is reaching its tentacles into society. Each maintains the older, traditionalist values; the kibbutz is upheld as the bastion of purity in a sea of corruption.

In this setting, several American characters appear. While they are both extremely naive, both Mike and Minah are shown to possess skills and attitudes necessary for the revitalization of the developing State. Perhaps out of necessity, the diatribe against the older generation of Americans is put in the background, as Israel was in dire need

of the assistance which the American Jewish establishment regularly sent. For that reason and perhaps because of the generally convivial relationship between Israel and the United States in that period, the previous polemics against American Jewry temporarily abated. Instead, the image of American Jews on the Israeli stage of the fifties was focused on the younger generation of American Jews. They are portrayed as being the new blood, the innovators of new ideas, and the new champions of an older and fading idealism to which the country needs to return.

While Israeli plays of the 1960's were much more diverse in both style and theme, the three selected plays in which Americans are featured are all cast from the same ideological mold. Mossinson's *A Happy Evening on Park Avenue* is a scathing indictment of the hypocrisy of American Jewry. Therein American Jews are portrayed as materialistic devils, willing to sell their souls -- and Israel -- to the enemy for a few more dollars. Meged's short satire, *Goldsmith and Son* is much like an updated version (though enlivened with sight-gags and belly laughs), of pre-Independence comedies. Again (as in his *I Like Mike*), the younger generation of American Jews are seen as potential olim, joiners of kibbutzim and revitalizers of the former idealism. Yet the older generation (represented by Marvin and Pearl Goldsmith), unlike that of Ashman's and Beilin's plays, are now beyond salvation. Unlike Mike's father -- the benign patron -- the Goldsmiths are unwilling to accept their son's values transformation and retreat, as quickly as is possible, to their slothful galut lives.

The third play of the sixties, Bartov's *Go Home, Jonathan!* is primarily concerned with the effects of yeridah to America upon the Israeli. Apparently, the Israeli who leaves the country very quickly ceases to be an Israeli. Though Bartov too upholds the older, markedly socialist values, the evil he sees in American life is more sweeping than the cardboard simplicities of Ashman and Beilin. Conspicuous consumption, wastefulness and the demeaning of manual labor in America are anathema to him. Meshullam (who clearly represents the values of the playwright), like the prophet Nehemiah, inveighs against his son and his family to return home. Like the prophet, who pulled on the hair of the assimilationists of his day, Meshullam overturns the diplomat's complacency, forcing him to admit his sin. Again, as a typical theme in many of these plays, the younger generation is the heroic one. Leora -- who, despite her Israeli birth is for all purposes an American -- and her boyfriend "Franky, the little Zionist", are open to Meshullam's call to idealism. They are the driving force which result in Bartov's happy ending.

The theme of yeridah and the results it has upon the yored in the land of (as Abramson characterized the playwright's view), "booze, boobs and boredom"² is also seen in *Virgo*. The play is retrogressive, in that, as a product of 1972, it:

...has not raised itself above its milieu or created characters other than the identical "types" of one kind or another that peopled the social drama of the fifties and sixties.³

Yet a major ideological step is made between *Go Home, Jonathan!* and Chen's *Virgo*. The former, while being a vitriolic indictment of American society and especially of American Jewish life, still clings

to the hope of a former era; that one day, led by a young intellectual elite, there will arise a new wave of olim as American Jews en masse recognize the hopelessness of remaining in the golah. *Virgo* is a radical departure from Bartov and his Palmach generation's optimism. Amnon and Yael Goldman's daughter (whose name we do not learn), unlike the young American Jewish characters of earlier plays, is utterly lost to both Judaism and Zionism. Touring around Europe with her black boyfriend, sleeping with an assortment of her hippy friends, she, unlike Leora in *Go Home, Jonathan!*, is not upheld as a model. Both American Jews, yordim and their children, can now be safely written off the pages of Jewish history, as life in the American golah is a death-blow to the Jewish psyche.

While Shtandall's *Aliza* is only of peripheral interest in this study, Yehoshua's *Last Treatments* is, in a way, both an artistic and ideological culmination of all that preceded it. Dramaturgically it is superb, with all the nuances, ambiguities, depth of character development and use of theatrical tools one expects from fine theater. Ideologically, it is quite consonant with Yehoshua's philosophy of the last few years. Ann, as a mute, is a theatrical symbol of the golah in general; entirely passive, directionless, bound up in her own internal problems to such a degree that she cannot deal with reality. She vividly portrays Yehoshua's view of Jewish life outside of the Jewish homeland; if it is not dead yet, then at least it is on its last legs. Like his polemical prose, *Last Treatments* makes the point that, while fraught with emotional difficulties, authentic Jewish existence can only be found in Israel. This theme is also a tonal element in several other

plays and works of fiction by other prominent Israeli writers in the 1970's.

* * *

Does (in Bialik's words), "American Jewish life stand on the legs of a chicken."? In sum (with a brief respite in the 1950's), Israeli playwrights have taken this adage as axiomatic. What we see in their plays is an extended variation on the same theme, variegated to suit the times in which they were written. American Jewish life is, in their collective view, unwholesome. The cancers of materialism, assimilation and hedonism have affected Jewish life in America to such an extent that, by the 1970's, the major Israeli playwrights declare American Jewry to be very sick -- perhaps catatonic or comatose -- if not dead already.

Are their charges true? The answer would seem to depend upon the yardstick which one employs to measure the health of a community. As none of the playwrights considered in this study are of a religious bent, they do not deal with Judaism qua religion, rather, they assume as axiomatic that Jewishness is a nationality. In such a view, the Jew who dwells for long outside the homeland, wherein he/she draws spiritual sustenance soon becomes ill. A fortiori, those born outside the homeland are alienated from their real selves. Thus, American Jews, who by and large have shown absolutely no indication of emigrating en masse to Israel are, in the playwrights' eyes, cut off from the principal means of Jewish strength. In their view, American Jewish life is a contradiction in terms and is presently meeting its end, "not with a bang, but a whisper."

Dramatists, of course, are not necessarily social scientists, nor do we reasonably expect their works to be necessarily accurate portrayals. We expect them to extract an essence rather than to draw a demographic portrait. In the collective view of Israeli playwrights over the past five decades, the sole hermeneutic employed in discussing American and other diaspora Jewries has been Zionism. Thus, the Judaism of American Jews is not a concern for most of these writers. (Yehoshua is the exception, as he fully develops in his *Between Right and Right* a view in which Zionism is integral to any form of Jewish religiosity.) Had the playwrights approached their topic with a different notion of "Jewishness" to begin with, their resulting portrayals of American Jewry would have been vastly different.⁴ Then, they would have had to deal with the apparent health and wealth of American Judaism as a religion, the enormous number of scholarly and literary works it continues to produce and the plethora of religious institutions it supports.

While American Jews are not univocal on the question of whether Jewish identity is primarily religious or ethnic/nationalistic, Israeli authors are. For the overwhelming majority of Israeli authors -- viz. the existence of a "Canaanite" school of writing -- Jewishness is almost entirely definable as identification as part of am yisrael. In such a view, the charges levied against American Jewry seem to be -- if a bit exaggerated (but we might ascribe this to poetic license) -- rather true. As an ethnic group, American Jews are facing a demographic disaster unparalleled except perhaps by the European holocaust of the 1940's. The incidence of marriages which begin at least as inter-faith relationships is by all accounts growing. Mere handfuls of American

Jews are emigrating to Israel, and almost an equal number return each year.⁵ Similarly, alarming numbers of Israelis continue to forsake their homeland, arriving in the United States with none of the religious background which supported earlier immigrant groups. The alarm sounded in the plays of Israeli authors about the imminent disappearance of thousands of yordim from the Jewish people very much have their roots in reality.

These conclusions are admittedly less than comprehensive, nor did I expect the results of this research to bear earth-shattering results. For those already familiar with the overall scope of Israeli literature, they should be less than shocking. For those for whom the subject of Israeli drama is -- as it is for most people -- entirely terra incognita, I hope to have provided a glimpse into that world. It is a world which defines itself in a manner quite different to that in which Americans have done for their own intellectual endeavors. That which is accepted as undeniably true by Israeli authors simply is a matter of open questioning to non-Israeli Jews. Thus, when we find the images of America and its Jews on Israeli stages to be distorted, to be quite unlike the self-image we have made for ourselves, we ought not to be surprised. If anything then, this study has shown the utter divergence of opinion, which begins when one proceeds from such radically different assumptions and culminates when one judges reality by so vastly different measuring instruments. If I have provided a better understanding of the other side in what ought to be a dialectic, rather than a disputation, then the American Jewish reader perhaps will understand both himself and his relationship to Israel somewhat more compassionately.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VII:

1. Fischman, Naomi. Western and Eastern Culture Reflected in Modern Hebrew Literature. Jerusalem Academic Press, Jerusalem, 1976.
2. Abramson, Modern Hebrew Drama. p. 80.
3. Ibid.
4. Perhaps this represents a rear-guard effort. The near univocality with which Israeli authors denounce Jewish life outside of Israel -- and in America in particular -- may be a sign of closing ideological ranks when in fact no mutually agreed upon doctrine exists. The Zionism which sustained earlier generations no longer seems adequate as an intellectually unifying force. Gila Rama-Pauch writes (in Hebrew Annual Review, Vol. II, 1978):

The contemporary Israeli writer, unlike his predecessors in the Haskalah and Techiyah periods, does not wrestle with a complete and existing heritage.

...(Whereas previous generations struggled with and reacted to Judaism and Jewishness)
...the contemporary Israeli writer is grappling with the problem of defining his value-system. (pp. 132,136)

Extending her reasoning, perhaps the denouncements of the golah by today's Israeli writers is similar to their fathers' open disdain for Judaism qua religion. In a curious irony then, the Jew of the golah is scorned because of his secure identity as a Jew, whereas the Israeli lives in a cultural-religious milieu which is still being defined.
5. Bachi, Roberto. "Diaspora Population: Past Growth and Present Decline", in Jerusalem Quarterly #22. Winter, 1982. pp. 3-16.

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