

## With the face to the future: The kibbutz in recent literary works

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The kibbutz, which was considered one of the greatest successes of the socialist dream, failed to survive history, which replaced socialism with both capitalism and globalization. Numerous texts, literary, documentary, and scholarly, have tried to comprehend the social developments that took place in the kibbutz during the period of its demise, especially over the 1980s and the 1990s. This article focuses on two works – *Habayta (Home)*, Assaf Inbari, 2009) and *Bein haverim (Between friends)*, Amos Oz, 2012) – both of which refrain from solely addressing the rift that the kibbutz underwent, but rather attempt to see in the moment of the kibbutz's disintegration a stage in a historical process that will ultimately enable creation of new values on the ruins of the old ones. Both works triggered powerful response from literary critics and from the general public, and contributed to shaping a new perspective on the history of the kibbutz.

**Keywords:** kibbutz; socialism; constellation of space; ethics; utopia; Assaf Inbari; Amos Oz

### Introduction

The kibbutz, which began as an accomplishment of the socialist dream and was considered one of its greatest successes, failed to survive history, which replaced socialism with both capitalism and globalization. After the period of disintegration, a new social structure started rising on its ruins: it was more moderate, less aspirational, willing to compromise with reality and to abandon the great dream of a just, egalitarian society.<sup>1</sup> Numerous texts, literary, documentary and research-based, have tried to comprehend the social developments that took place in the kibbutz during the period of its demise, especially over the 1980s and the 1990s. They portray the kibbutz in that period as a society whose rules had imploded – whose regulations still reflected the socialist utopia and did not yet accord with capitalist society. The pivotal law, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” had become a hollow commandment, signifying nothing and with no reflection in reality. It addressed people whom it had actually forsaken – anyone included in it was excluded from it, so everyone existed outside and against it.<sup>2</sup> In this situation, the collective that had been intended to express the wishes of all its members, became an oppressive fossilized power, which operated without the backing of any beliefs – neither the belief in the possibility of creating a new man, nor belief in the individual's liberty and right to self-fulfillment.

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This article focuses on two works – Assaf Inbari’s *Habayta* (Home, 2009) and Amos Oz’s *Bein haverim* (Between friends, 2012) – both of which refrain from solely addressing the rift that the kibbutz underwent, but rather attempt to see in the moment of the kibbutz’s disintegration a stage in a historical process that will ultimately enable its rebirth. Inbari’s book is a literary historical document that portrays Kibbutz Afikim’s development from the early twentieth century until its end, while Amos Oz’s *Bein haverim* consists of a collection of fictional stories that describe kibbutz life in the 1960s. Despite the differences between the two works, they both examine the history of the kibbutz in a similar manner, observing its socialist past, following its disintegration, and trying to mark out new historical options, which may be able to replace the old utopian dream. They are the options of life lived within work and creation (*Habayta*) and of a new ethical utopia (*Bein haverim*). Both works triggered powerful responses from literary critics and from the general public, and contributed to shaping a new perspective on the history of the kibbutz.

A kibbutz member who is responsible for work in the orchards demands that everyone volunteers for fruit-picking on the Sabbath, but when the day comes he doesn’t turn up and is found in his room listening to the radio; a female kibbutz member takes apples from the kitchen to give to her son who has left the kibbutz, and is accused of theft by the kibbutz food-manager who was her son’s childhood friend; kibbutz committee-members who enjoyed generous perks over the years resist privatization because of it – these examples from Shoshana Gottschalk-Sabag’s *Lifamim petza lifamim sufah* (Sometimes wound, sometimes storm, 2012), and Yisrael Oz’s *Ha-asefah ha-aharonah* (The last assembly, 2012), like many other examples cited in interviews, conversations, and documents, clearly reveal that the law which still drove kibbutz regulations had become irrelevant to everyone. Everyone was now an exceptional case – those who exploited the law, those who tried to evade it, and those abused by it.

The books discussed in this article refuse to address that situation as a permanent present of continuous wrongdoing and malice. They view it more as a vacuum, created as an interstice between the withered socialist dreams of the past and future dreams still undreamt. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin describes that constellation of times in terms of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*: the face of the angel of history, claims Benjamin,

is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>3</sup>

Like the angel, the two works observe the waves that destroyed the socialist past, and yet they do not dwell on them. Nor do they dwell on the period where morality, justice, and reciprocal responsibility split away from the laws and regulations, and kibbutz society was left stranded in an empty space. Their movement is like that of the angel, towards the future, even as they watch the debris of the past.

It can be described otherwise, too. These works remember the event that diverged from the historical situation, revealed its inner emptiness, named that emptiness, and rewove the old knowledge around it, thus creating a new condition. Alain Badiou

speaks about events that herald a new truth. This truth must be universal and as such, it links the individual's finite life to the broader human experience, letting him discover the eternal and infinite within the finite and limited human condition. And even if that event elapses, and its inherent truth dissipates along with it, Badiou adds, it does not disappear. Like skin burned by fire, it leaves traces of memory and pain, and we must seek those traces out of loyalty to that truth which still exists – even if just an ember, just a smoky flame.<sup>4</sup>

The kibbutz was an event of that kind, envisioned to furnish a solution not only for the society it accommodated, not only for the Jewish people, but for humanity itself. Its roots lay in the vacuum of Russia's tsarist society, where the architects of the kibbutz sought new options and a new truth, albeit a mythical one. Though they failed, their experience left traces that can be identified and followed, even if they floundered in a new vacuum. This is the role taken on by the texts discussed here. They attempt to fill in that interstice between times long-gone and those still to come. Perhaps the works discussed here express types of search that define our contemporary reality, the quest for a melody "that may remain," as Modi Bar-On defined it in the TV series *The Kibbutz* (Anat Zeltser and Modi Bar-On, 2011): "the place, a sense of the place, the shape of one's native landscape, but perhaps together with the melody a few words may linger on, some ideas, a handful of dreams about equality and justice, dedication and morality – perhaps unattainable dreams, but still worth examining." Or, as Assaf Inbari said in the series, observing the ruins of Kelet Afikim – once the Middle East's biggest enterprise: "There's something stimulating in a ruin, because if it's a kind of visual elegy for a former acme, vision, enthusiasm, it arouses a form of desire, I think, to return to it with a fresh format, on other frontlines of creativity." Amos Oz summarizes this, in a letter to Assaf Inbari: "And I think the kibbutz will be reborn. Maybe not in Israel, certainly not with *hora* dancing and nights in the hay-barn, certainly in a less childish version (in terms of human nature). But it will return (apparently not during my lifetime) because there will be people (a minority) who prefer to try and live as a kind of extended family instead of what modern life offers us, with people working beyond their capacities to make more money than they need to buy things they have no need for, in order to impress people who don't like them. The whole accounting hasn't ended."<sup>5</sup>

Each in its own way, *Habayta* and *Bein haverim* attempt to seek traces of that socialist truth, so that in their wake and from their remnants, a new truth – new human relationships – can flourish. Both exist in what Hannah Arendt called a "space that is wholly defined by things that are no longer experienced, and by those that are not yet experienced."<sup>6</sup> Inbari tries to use art, production, and creativity as a bridge connecting the socialist past to a future that is capable of preserving it, while within that space Amos Oz aims to link traces of the past with the possibility of new, ethical, and humane relationships.

Both books also shape the ties between past and future through descriptions of space holding traces of the past while forming new paths towards the future. In that way, the works construct a constellation of space alongside a constellation of times.<sup>7</sup> The traces of the landscape bear the memory of the socialist beliefs in the past, based on the link between the land and the place, within a life of work and creation; the link that connects production and creativity to the place and the land is also one of concern and responsibility towards the Other. A.D. Gordon described it when he spoke of "redeeming the land by reviving its settlers," "In life, in production, in sorrow, in

song.”<sup>8</sup> This kind of life is not necessarily “urban, not even rural, but human,” it involves a culture grounded on “moral responsibility to all others, solidarity with other families, nations, the people.”<sup>9</sup>

Books and films produced in the Yishuv and in the early years of the State mirrored the relationships between the individual, the land, society, and labor, by creating an unbounded space.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition held at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 2005, entitled *Togetherness: The “Group” and the Kibbutz in Collective Israeli Consciousness*, and Tali Tamir’s introduction to it, depict the kibbutz as a huge space that constitutes the home – open, flowing between the paths leading from the children’s houses to the parents’ rooms, from the parents’ rooms to the dining-room, and from the kibbutz to the surrounding fields. In the exhibition, the intimate space – which encompasses all of nature – is evoked in recollections of sitting on the lawn, wandering the footpaths, the sensuality of unmediated contact with the earth, and the relationship with “the plants, the birds, and the stars in the background.”<sup>11</sup> Such a relationship with the landscape is captured perfectly in films like Ran Tal’s *Yaldei ha-shemesh* (Children of the sun, 2007) and Dror Shaul’s *Adamah meshuga’at* (Sweet mud, 2006), and described in detail in Yehudit Kafri’s memoir *Kol ha-kayitz halakhnu yehefim* (All summer we walked barefoot):

Beneath was the earth, in some places black and muddy, full of puddles in winter. Other parts, especially in the fruit groves, was *hamra* – the soft, caressing red soil. Earth that brought forth weeds and thistles, vegetables, fruit and flowers with equal ease. We loved to run across it barefoot all summer, and at high noon we had to jump over the sandy tracks from one pool of shade to another as fast as we could, because the sand had absorbed immense heat that burned the soles of our feet. We inhabited a circle within outer circles: in the children’s houses, the dining room, the swimming pool and the reading room. Encircling us were the parents’ shacks, later replaced by houses and lawns, and surrounding them in turn were the orchards. A soaring eucalyptus grove enclosed all those inner circles of our lives. There was something very protected yet simultaneously breached.<sup>12</sup>

Inbari clings to the traces of those harmonious landscapes and the productive endeavors that took place within them. In Amos Oz’s stories, he ranges between the scenery of dreams from the remote past and the landscapes of dread that imbue his earlier stories, with a disconnect between the kibbutz and its natural setting, where nomads, vipers, and wild dogs roam – everything that threatens the protective culture of the kibbutz. In the tranquil scenery of the past, like the landscapes of dread in those earlier stories, he tries to identify other, unfamiliar, paths and walk along them to try and touch the Other;<sup>13</sup> paths leading to amorphous ethical spaces, unbounded, unfenced, without coordinates,<sup>14</sup> spaces that evade demarcation and definition. Constantly intersecting, they acknowledge neither distance nor proximity. Two people, side by side, feel separated by an ocean, while two people far apart can touch as if they were standing side by side.<sup>15</sup> These are liquid spaces, not determined by geographical data but rather by human relationships of responsibility, commitment, help, and support. On the one hand, they are relationships lacking definition, walls, or restrictions, yet equally they have no need of a harmonious, free-flowing space and are constructed outside and beyond it.

The temporal constellation is thus reflected in a spatial constellation, through which the disintegrating present looks back at the socialist harmony of the past. Out of that

past one can shape the possibility for a future ethical utopia that brings people together without grouping them into a new collective.

### *Habayta*

Assaf Inbari's work, *Habayta*, relates a long historical chronicle encompassing eighty years. Inbari contends that he wove the chronicle into "a linear plot structure that expresses the worldview as a process, not an isolated dramatic moment."<sup>16</sup> In a lecture at the Van Leer Institute, he described the history of the kibbutz, as he tried to structure it in *Habayta*. He starts with a train journey from Odessa to Moscow, at the moment when his protagonist Lunya Geller looks around and notices that "everyone kept close to their knapsacks because they all believed everyone else were thieves." The moment is meant to explain "why a young man from an assimilated Jewish family, for whom socialism is a distant rumor ... why someone whose Jewish and socialist backgrounds were so tenuous, would leave. He is the heir of a halvah factory, a comfortable bourgeois. Why would someone like him leave home for the Socialist Zionist Home, which is utter nonsense? Because he doesn't want to live where people think everyone else is a thief, and he'll build a kibbutz where ultimately everyone will think that everyone else are thieves."<sup>17</sup> But a closer reading elicits that its linear plot, though it has a causal chronological development with a beginning, middle and end, also halts that development to linger over discrete moments that are temporary junctions. The book is constructed as a series of episodes, each containing all three periods – past, present, and future – allowing the past to resonate within the present and the future. The array of chronological facts renders history open, packed with possibilities, pliable to change. While the book ostensibly depicts the narrative of Kibbutz Afkim, its origins, growth, and decline, it actually organizes the plot in an assortment of anecdotes, in each of which time is reduced to a single moment encapsulating all three periods. Thus the book introduces the beginning into the end, and leaves traces of the dream and its first fruition in every moment. It is the dream of the "Kibbutz Man ... in whom the drive to control others will be eradicated, together with exploitation and subjugation, greed and egoism."<sup>18</sup> This is an altruistic man, with no negative traits since a kind of educational alchemy uprooted them from his character, allowing him to function in total harmony with the group. Recalling that dream, the book follows its traces and explores how they led on to new future possibilities. Here are some examples: after the right-wing Likud party triumphs in the elections and before the massive collapse of the kibbutzim, two kibbutz members sit by the graves of their sons, killed in battle, and discuss the state that was taken from them. The picture is bookended between the past of the wars, and the future of catastrophes:

"They took our state away," said Dov Gilboa, who was watering the graves of Ido and Zali, to Dusya Korin, who was watering Avraimaleh's grave. "Yes," Dusya said, "they're going to turn off the faucet." Birds twittered in the cemetery's trees, and Dov said "Still, there's always the Histadrut."

"They'll shut the Histadrut down."

"Dusya, really?"

"And don't count too much on Bank Hapoalim."<sup>19</sup>

Past and present demarcate the picture and close it in a vise of death and ending, both forwards and backwards. Yet the protagonists, the kibbutz members, escape that vise by bursting out of the suffocating present towards different eras:

Lusya Galili closed himself away and wrote another hundred pages of his research into the battle of elephants in Rafiah, in the summer of 217 BCE. On the dining-room notice-board, the two dwarfs of Yisrael Hofesh, the archive's night-watchman, hung framed photographs of kibbutz history: the dovecote in the Kinneret Courtyard, kibbutz-members building the Naharayim power station, Luba Ravitz conducting the orchestra's first concert, and the first *bikkurim* [first fruits] ceremony. (249)

Assorted memories from the kibbutz past are compressed into the core of the disintegrating present-day and the apparently preordained future. They refuse to die away and remain in place like the cornerstone of a building from another time, a different history. Here, the past does not adhere to any particular beginning but rather to the end, and what is the end becomes the basis for the beginning. At its heart, paradoxically, lies what is born, created, changed, and decayed – in a different, even inverse, ordering of time.

In this and other cases, the eruption into past and future times is accompanied, even reinforced, by a combination of work and creativity: photos from the kibbutz past – building library shelves, working in the plantations, writing a poem about working in the plantations – all remove the protagonists from the moment, the present, from the collapse. When the kibbutznik protagonists of *Habayta* cultivate the fields and plantations and toil on the factory production-line, they do so as creative artists. They imbue their endeavors with imagination, inventiveness, enthusiasm, and vision, striving to produce something from nothing, no matter if workplace is a furniture factory, a fruit plantation, a cultural project, or artwork. For example, the Kelet factory manufactured sawdust that could have ended up as waste, but was instead scattered on the dining-room floor on rainy days, and in the children's adventure playground, until Mitya Krichman, the factory's founder, "recalled the newspapers that used to cook in Siberia, and decided to tip the sawdust into drums, add glue, stir, and compress the paste in a press and see what would happen. The outcome was sawdust-based plywood, and Dusya Korin hired more laborers from the Tzemach transit-camp for the new production line" (180–81). Here the work draws together memories of the past (Mitya's newspapers in Siberia) with plans for the future, transforming the moment into a focus from which different times take shape – free, open, flowing onward and backward, to the beginning from the end, to life within death.

Work and creative efforts that lead from memories of past times to plans for the future, interweave with portrayals of the landscape, and also intersect with junctions connecting times. The harmonious scenery of the kibbutz bears memories of the past within it, preserves them, and provides a reservoir for future plans. The tree and the man, the landscape and the home, work and the earth – all are tightly connected in the book. In many passages the story leads us as if following a film camera, from a long-shot of scenes of the valley to a closer shot inside the kibbutz with its lawns, and then to a close-up of a house and its occupant: "On the Yarmouk's banks a vineyard was planted, its northern area belonged to the *tochka*, while in the section designated for housing Haim Horowitz planted decorative trees around the still empty plots where homes would later be built. Zvi Brontman brushed his horses in the stable, the nursery-school teacher brushed the children's hair, lovers walked to Anemone Hill and

Cyclamen Hill” (104). The camera moves here from the Yarmouk river and its banks to the settlement point – the *tochka* (“point,” in Russian) – then comes closer to the yard and the trees, focusing on the houses and people dwelling there. Its movement closely tracks human movement: planting, building, working in the stable, strolling from here to there, from the “point” to the hill. All the way, the story transitions from the Jordan river and its pumps, to the citrus groves, from there to the field crops, then again outwards to the date plantation, the wheat fields, the mountains to the west, and back to the kibbutz buildings. The mountains, the valley, the kibbutz, and the fields beyond it become a single arena of work, planting, and constructing and it fills the intersections through which time flows with memories of settlement in the past, through the present, on towards the future. It is that space, saturated with memories and beliefs of the past that preserves them until such time when they can be revived, for the future.

In *Habayta*, the picture of the future is clouded, chiefly consisting of left-over dreams from the socialist kibbutz past. Amos Oz’s *Bein haverim* paints the picture of that future in the hues of a new utopia – an ethical utopia.

### ***Bein haverim***

The stories that comprise *Bein haverim* return in time to the 1960s, when the kibbutz had not yet lost its status in Israeli society and internal rifts had still not shattered it completely. Into that period, the stories retroactively inject possibilities that may be realized later, or perhaps remain unfulfilled. The present in the stories, like the present in *Habayta*, is loaded with times, situations, and possibilities. It is a Messianic moment, as Benjamin defines it, capable of “fanning the spark of hope in the past.”<sup>20</sup> It constantly confronts the potential of the new human relationships with ideologies from the past and with the violence and alienation that threatened to overwhelm them in the present. That moment ties together notions from the revolutionary socialist past that became corrupt and degenerate, with a new dream of ethical relationships. The different ideological junctions and the various time periods allow the book and its readers to soar above and look beyond the situation in a wider historical scope.

In the story “*Bein haverim*,” a father stands in the dark under his daughter’s window in the school building, listening to flute music, “a light, lengthy etude that repeated itself” when “[h]is heart suddenly clenched.” He returns to his apartment, listens to the radio until his eyes close and remains half-awake at night, hearing the jackals howling. Their conversations seem cold and alienated:

Nahum didn’t know and didn’t ask about her social life, and she didn’t volunteer anything . . . . He and his daughter never talked about themselves, except for superficial things. Edna would say, for example, “You have to go to the clinic. I don’t like that cough of yours.” Nahum would say, “We’ll see. Maybe next week. This week we’re installing a new generator in the brooder house at the chicken coop.” Sometimes they would talk about music, which they both loved. Sometimes they did not talk at all, but played Schubert on the old gramophone. They never spoke about the deaths of Edna’s mother or brother. Nor did they bring up childhood memories or future plans. They had an unspoken agreement not to touch on feelings, nor to touch each other.<sup>21</sup>

In such a family relationship, Oz paradoxically discloses a profound relationship, based on mutual concern that does not pass in words or physical contact, but in flute music, through the voices on the radio, and the howling of jackals in the familiar darkness.

Levinas defines this language of silence as a “dit” (i.e. “the said, as opposed to *dire*, saying): cascades that spread forth within the act of speaking, echoing the other’s unresolved presence.<sup>22</sup> It makes space for the existence of a human connection that does not attempt to control the other or subjugate him to collective or private truths, but carries with it a commitment, a responsibility and a respect for anyone who is other, different, or inexplicable. This connection can be called ethical.

In this case, the concern shown to one another does not replace the older form of selfless, collective solidarity, but flows through it and is nurtured by it. The two perceptions – the ethical and the socialist – do not replace each other here, nor do they follow chronologically or causally. Rather, they exist side by side, confronting yet reinforcing one another: she visits him almost daily, takes his laundry, and every Friday she sews on his buttons, reminds him to go to the clinic, and he talks to her about the generator that has to be installed in the chicken brooder-pen. She follows her heart’s desire and her feelings when she decides to move in with her older teacher, her father’s long-time friend, while the father works on behalf of the whole kibbutz when he comes to reproach her. Even so, he moves from his world to hers when he abandons the idea of reprimanding her, and leaves without speaking out. He believes in an uncompromising socialism, and this is the source of his closeness to her fanatical and unbending partner, and at the same time his human belief struggles with his socialist beliefs, keeping him in an unending tense conflict with his old friend.

The story “*Bein haverim*” is set in a period when tension was already simmering between laws and regulations, and the life beyond them, with jealousy, animosity, and common envy, but it does not give in to the emptiness of the kibbutz, which abandoned the ideology that had guided it for decades. It builds over it a bridge connecting it with other worldviews. In that way, it offers a social message that, surprisingly, erupts from a place where the old messages have become worthless but without negating them. It is a modest proposal – offering no “light unto the Nations,” nor light to humanity, but resonating with the discovery of the Other, the realization that beyond failed great beliefs concerning social, human, and individual change lies another possibility – a different utopia, not seeking to unite people around a great goal. And paradoxically by grasping the distance between people, and without abandoning them, it delineates a sort of option for diverging from the finiteness of human life, the loneliness, and reclusiveness.

In the book *Bein haverim*, words that have lost their power are replaced not only with everything unstated in speech, but also with a new language of limitless spaces. And in Assaf Inbari’s book, the spaces serve as a “container” in which forgotten history can be preserved.<sup>23</sup> In Amos Oz’s book, they are also moving towards a possible new language. Zvi Provizor (“The King of Norway”) is the kibbutz gardener: “He would go out at five every morning, reposition the sprinklers, till the soil in the flower beds, plant and prune and water, mow lawns with the noisy mower, spray against aphids and spread organic and chemical fertilizer. . . . Thanks to him the kibbutz bloomed. Every unused strip of land was planted with seasonal flowers. Here and there he had put in rock gardens where he planted varieties of cactus . . . he had a good aesthetic sense and everyone appreciated it” (6). Ziv Provizor resembles other gardeners in books about the kibbutz, such as Yael Neeman’s *Hayinu he-atid* (We were the future, 2011) and Yisrael Oz’s *Ha-asefah ha-aharonah*, and also mirrors the figure of the pioneer who creates in his labor the triadic relationship between the land, man, and society. His labor, like that of the other pioneers,



is both his art and his belief – a type of creative endeavor like the works that Mitya Krichman creates in *Habayta*. Zvi Provizor loves “the feel of loose earth and the softness of young stems, but the touch of others, men or women, caused his entire body to stiffen and contract as if he’d been burned” (17). Beyond the gardens he tends, he sees a wide world beset by disasters. He roams the kibbutz and informs everyone he meets on the way about earthquakes, crashes, buildings that collapsed on their inhabitants, conflagrations, and floods – incidents they could read about in the newspaper.

Zvi Provizor does not live within the flow of the harmonious landscape that merges the outer and the inner, but in the divided landscape of Oz’s early works – divided between the cultivated gardens inside the kibbutz and everything outside it, evoking a sense of dread allied with yearning or attraction. Yet Zvi does not remain in that divided landscape, for in the same way that he circles around the flow of the harmonious landscape, he roams around the cracked and disintegrating landscape, seeking other paths and ultimately arriving at a different landscape. With his friend Luna Blank, he builds a relationship of two lonely people, alienated and distant from each other, who sit side by side talking, though “he would sit on the right-hand edge of the left bench at the foot of the lawn and she would sit near him, on the left-hand edge of the right bench” (7). “One evening, as he regaled her with an affecting description of the famine in Somalia, compassion for him so overwhelmed her that she suddenly took his hand and held it to her breast” (17). He pulls his hand away, almost violently, and severs the relationship. They continue living in the same kibbutz but no longer talk to each other; eventually she leaves the kibbutz. And exactly then, when the shared space no longer unites them or separates them, as it did when they sat side by side on different benches, that an evasive, impossible relationship is created between them. It’s a relationship still based on work, creativity, and the landscape: he continues to tend the five houseplants left on her porch and again and again observes the pencil sketch Luna gave him – two cypress trees and a bench. “The trees looked melancholy, the bench was empty” (20). And yet there the sketch is – the solitary remnant of her pencil drawings that once filled the walls of the room – “sketches of landscapes, rocky hills and olive trees” (14).

Zvi Provizor remains alone at the story’s end but his life continues in a new landscape, consisting of a few houseplants and a sketch of cypress trees and a bench: through them he continues the relationship with a woman who is no longer there, not beside him, but not far from him. Their relationship, though not reciprocal, no longer depends at that stage on the place. They exist beyond it. Similarly, characters in other stories rebel against the space or disregard it.

The profound connection between the father and daughter in the story “Between Friends” takes place exactly when the two are separated by the school wall. She is in her room; he is outside, listening to the flute music, and vice versa. When they are both in the same room, close to each other, it is not the room that connects them, but the father’s powerful longing for her, as if they were at a distance from each other. The protagonists of this and other stories are seeking the possibility of reaching the remote other, beyond the walls and barricades – though also beyond proximity, without the option of merging into each other. The capacity to see the other without seeing him is the possibility of seeing what cannot be found in the space, or looking differently at what is found there.

The story “Deir Ajloun” broadens that sort of relationship into one with the Arab enemy. Its plot deals with a young man named Yotam, anxiously waiting for an

invitation from his uncle to go and study in Germany, though he hesitates because the kibbutz objects. This is the story's fundamental plot, but another one is discernible in it, one of landscapes and spaces bubbling up from the plots of previous stories by Amos Oz. Yonatan, a kibbutz member in the novel *A Perfect Peace*, decides in the winter of 1965 to leave his wife and the kibbutz on which he has been raised. "He had finally made up his mind to run away and start a new life." He feels "his whole life passing by in a clamorous smoke-filled room where a tedious argument about some bizarre matter dragged endlessly on." The kibbutz, the family room, relationships with his parents, at work and in the tractor shed are too confining. "The only thing he wanted was to pick up and walk out, to go someplace else, a place where he was waited for – and would not be waited for forever"; "His plan was to go far away, as far as he could get, to a place as different as it could be from the kibbutz ... perhaps a strange, truly big city, with a river, with bridges, and towers and tunnels and fountains with monstrous gargoyles spouting water ... a place where anything is possible – love, danger, arcane encounters, some conquests."<sup>24</sup>

Before he actually gets up and leaves, he hikes with friends to Sheikh Dahr, an abandoned Arab village; a wild place, with remnants of the enemy, that arouses dread in the young hikers – though a lust to fight, too. The trip is more like a battle than a hike: as they roam the ruins they discover suspicious traces leading away from the site. They discuss tanks, Mirage aircraft, the Air Force, and defensive strikes. Someone seems to be lurking inside the old mosque – a compelling and repelling site for the protagonists, who conduct a ludicrous capture of the empty site. While there, in the village, Yonatan hears the sounds of the kibbutz, "its melancholy tones suggested a grave was being dug."<sup>25</sup>

Thirty years after Yonatan's dream, it is the turn of Yotam, the protagonist of the story "Deir Ajloun," to have that same dream – to leave the confining narrow place and enter the world. En route, like Yonatan, he halts among the remains of an Arab village, this time called Deir Ajloun. But something else happens in this story – a possibility forms to exist within both spaces simultaneously. To be in the kibbutz, to imagine, to see and to smell the remains of Deir Ajloun and from there to imagine, see, and smell the kibbutz: but this time, it is not death that connects these two spaces.

Like in the other stories, here too space has no boundaries or landmarks and the protagonists demarcate and construct it at every given moment. They do not recognize its laws, its borders or any kind of outlines; rather, they traverse it, unite it, and cross it to reach the other. The story begins with a description of the landscape, evoking those in *Where the Jackals Howl* and *Elsewhere, Perhaps*: "A dirty-grey sky hunched over us as if the desert had risen up and spread out upside down above the roofs of our small houses. The air was filled with fine dust ... " (115). Here too, dread, aridity, and despair emanate from the outside: "A gust of arid air mixed with the smell of scorched thorns blew down from the hilltop ruins of the abandoned Arab village of Deir Ajloun. Perhaps distant fires were still burning there" (122). Faced with the threat that originates outside his Spartan rundown tin shack – "The sour smell of rotten, fermenting orange peel and the stench of cow dung coming from the direction of the barn filled the room" (125) – Yotam plans to escape it all, and go to his uncle in Germany. Visible here too is the same total disconnect between outer and inner, between the hardscrabble misery of the kibbutz and the distant world outside, like in the previous stories and the book *A Perfect Peace*.

Towards the end of the story, Yotam sets off on the same journey that Yonatan took years before: he leaves the kibbutz, crosses the narrow circle of lawns, passes by the barns, walks towards the fields, and then to the hills. As he walks, his feet and movement create a connection that was severed in previous stories by Oz – between the inner realm of the kibbutz and its fields, and the spaces beyond it. He reaches the village, roams its paths, “passed his hands over the vestiges of the decapitated mosque, bent over to pick up a piece of earthenware that had once been the neck of a jar, passed a grindstone half buried in the ground” (135). While ostensibly he finds nothing because he does not know what to search for, he unknowingly finds what he was seeking, when “He heard the sounds of the kibbutz in the distance, strange, melancholy noises that seemed to come to him through a thick stone wall: a dull beating; the clang of metal against metal; the faint barking of dogs; the whirring of a raspy motor, maybe a tractor someone was having trouble starting; and also a person’s voice shouting and shouting beyond the distance and the blazing heat” (136).

This time, they are the sounds of life, unlike the sounds in *A Perfect Peace* that evoked death. Walking along, Yotam is freed from constrictions of place and identity: he can be in two places simultaneously, in his own place, and in the place of the Other. He sees the Other through his own eyes and gaze, and sees himself through the Other’s eyes. On his way to the village, he passes landscapes shaped by Zionist ideology – spaces that merged human settlement with nature, the built place and the open spaces, the inner realm and the outer. Intent on capturing the space, he triumphs over both the merged space and the dismantled space, is able to evade their laws of attraction and of movement, can exist simultaneously in two places, within two identities, and inhabit an imaginary, impossible world, where in spite of everything he can re-create a relationship with the ultimate Other – the Arab – and his eradicated past which is also Yotam’s own past. In other words, he is able to inhabit another space without boundaries and landmarks.

Alongside the narrative of spaces, “Deir Ajloun” also contains an unfulfilled love story between Yotam and Nina: like other relationships in the book, this one unfolds without any consideration for the space. He is in a place where she isn’t (hoeing her garden, making toys for the children, signing up for special work on Saturdays knowing she will be present, yet not approaching her), and is absent from the places where she is. Yet she has a place in his thoughts as he does in hers, and she knows wordlessly what is best for him, what he wants, and tries to persuade the kibbutz members to act accordingly.

Two kinds of relationships are formed in the story – one with an enemy, one with a lover. Both evolved in a rebellion against the sheltering spaces that Zionist ideology designed, and in the fissured spaces portrayed in works by Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and other authors of the 1980s. The literary space directed that rebellion against the united, consolidated collective that was to have been built in those harmonious Zionist spaces, and against the complete human disconnection between individuals and the Other – lover or enemy – in the years of disappointment with the Zionist dream’s fulfillment and the downfall of the kibbutz.

In this story we can identify – as in every story in the book *Bein haverim* – the possibility of a different kind of human relationship. We can define that possibility, which we have termed Levinasian ethics,<sup>26</sup> as the same event that Badiou discusses with its inherent potential for undermining the existing order.<sup>27</sup> Like historical

socialism, it fills the human vacuum created in a society functioning without the criteria of morality, human and social responsibility, and justice, defines it, and builds new knowledge and criteria around it. And like historical socialism, it tries to chart a sort of transcendental time that exists beyond the individual's life and death. Yet the point of origin is not society as a collective body, but the individual's attitude to the Other.

The socialist collective society of the kibbutz failed and disintegrated. Several authors have tried to design from its ruins possibilities for a new society grounded on an infrastructure of work, creativity, and human relations. The two works, *Habayta* and *Bein haverim*, are just two examples of this. While they, and others, focus on the kibbutz, they may well provide guidelines for Israeli society and culture as a whole.

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### Notes

1. On the history of the kibbutz and its literature, see [Ben-Rafael and Topel](#), "Kibbutz shoneh"; [Tzahor](#), "Aherim"; [Keshet](#), "Sifrut ha-kibbutz"; [Halamish](#), "Ha-kibbutz veva-alayah". For extensive studies of the kibbutz and the developments that took place in it, see [Lieblich](#), *Kibbutz Makom*, *Gilgulo shel makom*, and "Ha-kibbutz al-saf ha-alpayim." A number of books dealing with Israeli society from the historical and literary perspectives contributed to this article, among them: [Hever](#), *Ha-sipur veva-le'om*; [Schwartz](#), *Mah she-ro'im mi-kan*; [Feldstein](#), *Halutz, avodah, matzlemah*; and [Shapira](#), "Mi-dor ha-palmah." These studies described the history of the kibbutz and the process in which it crumbled. This article, through two literary works, examines the potential for the emergence of new options and beliefs that might rise from the old ideology.
2. On this subject, see also [Agamben](#), *Homo Sacer*; and [Elsaesser](#), "Hitting Bottom."
3. [Benjamin](#), *Illuminations*, 255.
4. [Badiou](#), "The Event."
5. From a private letter.
6. Cited in [Liska](#), *Giorgio Agambens leerer Messianismus*, 35.
7. Regarding the shaping of space in literary and cinematic works in general, and in Hebrew-language literature more particularly, see [Tzoran](#), *Tekst, olam, merhav*; [Schwartz](#), *Hayadata*; [Nadler](#), "Ko'ordinatot shel tyutat kiyum"; [Gertz and Khleifi](#), *Space and Memory*; [Gertz and Hermoni](#), "Smashing up the Face of History"; [Zanger](#), *Place, Memory and Myth*.
8. [Gordon](#), "Ha-kongres." "That is, every plot of land in *Eretz Yisrael* is considered redemption in the nationalist sense only to the extent that it has led to the revival of the settler on it, and vice versa. Every settler in *Eretz Yisrael* is deemed to have returned to revival, to life in the national sense, only to the degree that he brings the land to national revival through himself" (*ibid.*). These and other words of Gordon encapsulate the powerful belief that "the renewal and revival" of the individual "will only spring from . . . full partnership with Nature and with everything within it" (*ibid.*). The implication is that returning to nature is equivalent to returning to labor "in all its forms, but most of all – all work of the soil" and that returning to labor entails "distancing from all forms of exploiting the labor of others" ([Gordon](#), *Mivhar ktavim*, 277).
9. [Gordon](#), *Shutafut tivit*.

10. See, for example, early films and books, such as *Avodah* [Work] (dir. Helmer Larsky, 1935); *Dma'ot ha-nehamah ha-gdolah* [The great promise] (dir. Yossef Leitz, 1947); *Yom nifla hu ha-mahar* [Tomorrow's a wonderful day] (dir. Helmer Larsky, 1947); Yehuda Ya'ari's novel *Ka-or yahel: Megilat hayav shel Yosef Landa* [Like glittering light] (1937); and Natan Agmon (Bistritzky)'s novel *Yamim va-leilot: Hagadah al mitos ha-edah* [Days and nights] (1940). The same connection to the land that was depicted in those works also appears in later works like Moshe Shamir's novel *Hu halakh ba-sadot* [He walked through the fields (1947)] and Uri Zohar's film *Kol mamzer melekh* [Every bastard a king (1968)]. On this theme, see also the compelling discussion in Amir Har-Gil and Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler, "Landscape and Architecture of the Israeli Kibbutz as seen in Film and Television" (unpublished ms., 2012); and also Gertz, *Makheleh aheret*.
11. Tamir, *Togetherness*, 7.
12. Kafri, *Kol ha-kayitz*, 43. Or as Idit Livni-Gabai phrases it: "The 'womb' is the whole-kibbutz, with its blue skies and the sun shining in its navel" (Tamir, ed., *Togetherness*, 146).
13. See also a description of paths of that kind in de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and Zanger, *Place, Memory and Myth*.
14. For a description of the postmodern urban space, see Watson and Gibson, *Postmodern Cities*.
15. See also Mitchell, "Holy Landscape."
16. Avner Avrahami, "Assaf Inbari mefarek et havrei kibutz afikim be-sefer hadash" [Assaf Inbari deconstructs the members of Kibbutz Afikim in a new book], *Ha'aretz*, April 12, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1255365>.
17. "Prof Menachem Brinker and Assaf Inbari Talk about *Habayta*," Van Leer Institute, January 18, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-37iFInjII>, "Yitzugim hadashim shel ha-kibbutz ha-yashan" [New representations of the old kibbutz], Lecture Series, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem.
18. Golan, *Ha-hinukh ha-meshutaf*, 68.
19. Inbari, *Habayta*, 248. (Further references will be given in parentheses within the text.)
20. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 324.
21. Oz, *Between Friends*, 36–37. (Further references will be given in parentheses within the text.)
22. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*; and also Kenaan, *Panimdibur*.
23. And see de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.
24. Oz, *A Perfect Peace*, 7.
25. *Ibid.*, 155.
26. See the works by Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, Ethics and Infinity, Totality and Infinity, Humanism of the Other*, and *Difficult Freedom*; see also Kenaan, *Panimdibur*; and Amiel-Hauser, "Aherut bidyonit."
27. Badiou, "The Event."

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