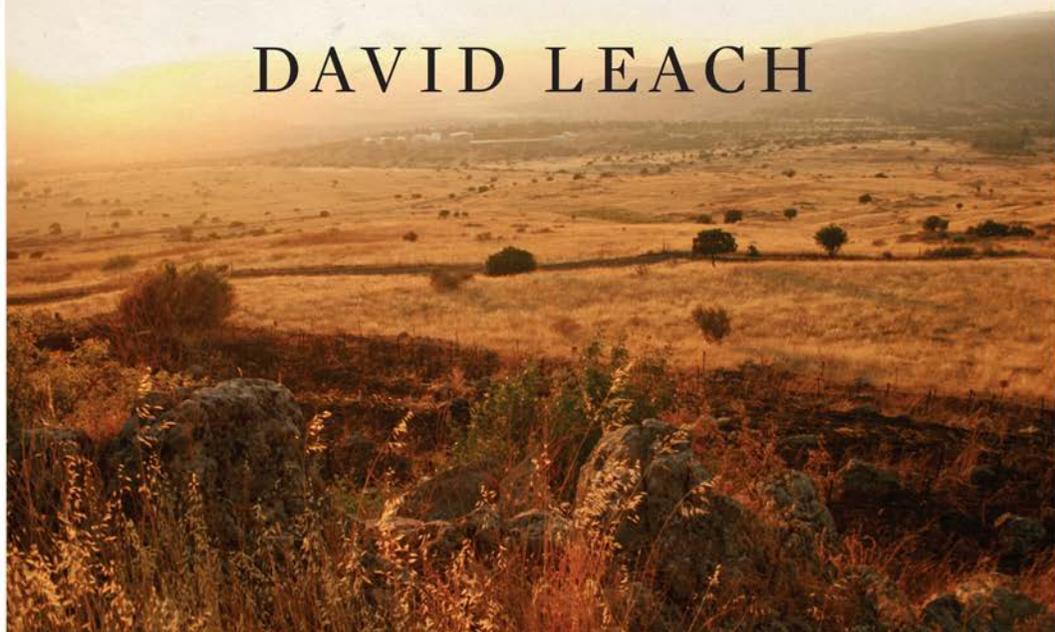


THE FUTURE OF THE KIBBUTZ
IN A DIVIDED ISRAEL

CHASING
UTOPIA

DAVID LEACH



CHASING UTOPIA
The Future of the Kibbutz in a Divided Israel

by David Leach



*For Jenny
and our own
children of the dream*

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PROLOGUE

It Is Dangerous to Read Facebook

*These things only are impersonal:
insomnia, land mines, and long hours of work.
Everything else is ours or not ours,
divided like the world
inside and outside the skin.*

—Susan Tichy, “Volunteers”

Another summer. Another war.

Like tinder in a dry valley, it rarely takes much spark to set Israel and its neighbours alight. In the hot months of 2014, Gaza catches fire again. The world watches it burn. As the violence spikes, I can't avert my eyes from the headlines that call to mind the lines from "It Is Dangerous to Read Newspapers," an early poem by Margaret Atwood: *Each time I hit a key / on my electric typewriter, / speaking of peaceful trees / another village explodes*. Decades later, it's not any safer to read blogs or Facebook updates, browse Twitter feeds or YouTube channels. My TV, laptop and smartphone scroll a digital tickertape of bomb strikes and body counts, punctuated by diatribes and denunciations from friends and strangers. Most people, like myself, have no real stake in this Middle East feud other than our own curdled sense of outrage.

We *need* to have an opinion, though, because the bloody stalemate between the state of Israel and the stateless Palestinian people has

become the political litmus test of our age. Who you support says who you are—politically, personally. In a land claimed by two peoples, only one story can be heard at a time.

In the summer of 2014, the catalyst and the conflict prove especially gruesome. Three Jewish pupils, studying at an Orthodox *yeshiva* in the occupied West Bank, disappear while hitchhiking. Eighteen days later, Israeli authorities find the boys' bodies under a pile of stones. The army sweeps through Palestinian villages in search of the killers, while Israeli politicians blame the military wing of Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement. Right-wing Jewish settlers burn an Arab boy to death. Palestinian militants from Hamas renew a campaign of lobbing crude rockets from the coastal enclave of Gaza deeper into Israeli territory. The Israeli Air Force responds with missile strikes. Airlines divert international flights. Israel musters tanks, artillery and tens of thousands of reserve soldiers for a ground assault. Generals dub the new military operation "Protective Edge," which sounds like a high-tech shaving device but is far, far bloodier. Images of shattered schools and apartment blocks in Gaza proliferate across the Internet. Anti-war protests turn violent in Paris and other European cities. When Israeli peaceniks march in Tel Aviv, right-wing thugs shout, "Death to leftists! Death to Arabs!" Hamas militants emerge from hand-dug tunnels near border kibbutzes and kill several IDF soldiers. Israeli commanders tell residents in Gaza to abandon neighbourhoods targeted as missile caches and Hamas command centres. More than 2,000 Palestinians, many women and children, die in a month-long storm of concrete and shrapnel.

I live thousands of miles away, along the Pacific shoulder of North America, on an island as lush and placid as Gaza and southern Israel are dry and volatile. And yet I am drawn into a debate in which rhetoric flees from all reason. Torrents of angry words and numbing images cascade down my screens. *Israel is an apartheid state of baby killers and war criminals! Gaza is ruled by Jew-hating Islamo-fascists who martyr their*

children as human shields! #GazaUnderAttack and #StandWithIsrael compete for clicks from armchair slacktivists like myself. My sympathies ping-pong between the Israelis I know, threatened by rocket fire and terror tunnels, and the horror show broadcast from the bombed-out, body-strewn streets of Gaza. I don't recognize the Israel where I once lived, the country to which I have returned several times. I can't hear the voices of the people, Jews and Palestinians alike, who spoke to me of hope and reconciliation.

In the weeks after the ceasefire, the Israel Defense Forces and Hamas will pull back to the heavily armed no-man's land of mutual antipathy that divides Israelis and Palestinians. Politicians and pundits will proclaim victory. The Internet will assign blame. Both sides will mourn their dead. And I will be left to wonder, *What happened to the original vision of this nation?* The Israel I know began more than a hundred years ago with twelve pioneers on the shores of the Jordan River. It began with a naive faith that these young dreamers could break ground and build a peaceable society for the long-exiled Jewish people and share the land of Palestine with their Arab neighbours. It began in the hope that, by living as equals, they could inspire the rest of the world to throw off the shackles of envy and overcome our long-held tribal hatreds. It began with the kibbutz.

PART ONE

Who Killed the Kibbutz?

Anyone who has never lived on a kibbutz doesn't understand the first thing about it. It's impossible to understand from the outside and this whole investigation of yours is pointless.

—Batya Gur, *Murder on a Kibbutz: A Communal Case*

— CHAPTER I —

Ghetto Life in the Finger of Galilee

Every child is born utopian. Our urge to create new worlds kicks in as soon as we can lift a block or wield a crayon. We build towers as precarious as Babel. We design tiny cities, guided by the divine laws of Lego or Fisher-Price—and now *Minecraft*. We imagine societies with leaders and followers, heroes and villains, histories and intrigues. Our instincts to build worlds and tell stories are entwined, a double helix of human creativity. Overshadowed by an adult society we can't quite understand, let alone control, we build microcosms over which we *can* rule.

Like most kids, I was obsessed with building worlds. Growing up, I engineered neighbourhoods for legless, bullet-headed toy figurines and played grade-school Jane Jacobs in my parents' basement. An old Kodachrome photo reveals a boy in a blond bowl cut, ever the good Catholic, arranging his Star Wars action figures on tiny wooden pews so they can attend Sunday Mass; in *my* galaxy far, far away, Boba Fett the bounty hunter needed to attend confession. My oddest obsession

was the Maginot Line. At 11 or 12, I read about France's military fortifications in an illustrated history text. Built in the 1930s to withstand a German assault, the Maginot Line became a Second World War footnote when the Nazis did an end run through Belgium on their blitzkrieg to Paris. I didn't care if the Maginot Line worked. To my young eyes, it was a marvel of design, an entire world carved beneath the surface of the earth. I was fascinated by the architecture, the cross-sections of underground chambers, tunnels and armaments—a subterranean network for a strategically inept nation of mole people. I filled notebooks with Maginot renovations and populated my corridors with bustling stick men.

Lewis Mumford, the American social critic and urban historian, called our instinct toward city-making a “will-to-utopia.” “It is our utopias that make the world tolerable to us,” he wrote in 1922. “The cities and mansions that people dream of are those in which they finally live.” In *The Story of Utopias*, Mumford distinguishes between different types. Our childhood visions of alternate realities satisfy what he calls the “utopia of escape.” In fantasy worlds, the human mind finds temporary respite from the drudgery and pain of daily life. A science-fiction novel. A postcard of a tropical beach on a cubicle wall. A Disneyland of the mind. Utopia as a flight from reality, a return to innocence.

One of the first urban scholars, Mumford was less interested in utopia as escapism than in “utopias of reconstruction”—utopia as an ambitious social-engineering project; utopia as a blueprint for a better life; utopia as a cure. The utopia of reconstruction, he explains, is “a vision of a reconstituted environment which is better adapted to the nature and aims of the human beings who dwell within it.”

When I first read those lines, I thought, *That sounds like the kibbutz.*

The pioneers of Israel's kibbutz movement had chased a vision of a new life and a better world. Their utopias of reconstruction didn't remain on the page, like Plato's Republic. Instead, they etched their

schemes into the rough earth, one settlement at a time, until an archipelago of communities stretched from the northern mountains to the Red Sea. Every wall they erected, every garden they sowed, every pathway they paved reflected a model society based on a communal way of life. “We shape our buildings,” Winston Churchill once wrote, “and afterwards our buildings shape us.” If you create the perfect village, in other words, the village will perfect you in turn.

That was the dream. But a blueprint for paradise is one thing. Making the vision a reality tends to be messier.



When people ask why, at the age of 20, I dropped out of university to live on a commune in Israel, I reply, “Look at my wrist.” There you can read a faded map of my past, a thin white scar that runs as straight as the Jordan River. It’s all that remains, aside from the odd arthritic pang, of what I like to call my “old college football injury.”

Which is true to a point. Fact: I fractured my right wrist in a scrimmage during my first semester of university.

A little macho-deflating context: I’d been playing *touch* football. In the snow. With journalism students.

Still, that bad break meant deferred exams and months in a cast and, after the tiny bone refused to heal, a screw and a bone graft. More time in a cast nixed plans to join my hometown high school sweetheart on a tree-planting contract in northern Alberta. She promised she would only be gone for a month and vowed to write every day. This was the summer of 1988, a more innocent and disconnected era: pre-satellite phone, pre-email, pre-Facebook and Skype. Our relationship would live or die on the wings of Canada Post.

I worked a temp job filing accident reports for the city’s transportation department. At home, I taught my left hand to type sappy love

letters to a remote P.O. box in the boreal forest. I kept mailing these letters, even when the replies diminished and then stopped.

In the wilderness, my hometown high school sweetheart had soured on our saccharine suburban dreams and traded up for someone new. He was, I would learn, ten years my senior, a veteran tree planter from the west coast and, worse, an artist. He had a thing for dinosaurs and topless chorus girls that he depicted in canvas collages slooped together from airplane glue, marbles and dismembered Barbie dolls. He had once been a heroin junkie but now only drank till his eyeballs went yellow. How could I compete?

I considered pulling a Lancelot, stealing my parents' Malibu Classic and driving across the continent to win her back. My friends talked me down from that fantasy. "Dude," they told me, "get over her."

It wasn't so easy. I had a broken heart, an aching wrist and enough money for tuition or trans-Atlantic airfare. I chose Door #2 and bought an open plane ticket to Tel Aviv.

Why Israel? A friend had backpacked around the Mediterranean and told me about something called a kibbutz. "What's that?" I asked. A kibbutz, I learned, was a cooperative farming village where backpackers could swap manual labour in fields or factories for room and board. Israel had hundreds of kibbutzes, from the grassy foothills of Mt. Hermon to the desert valley that led to the Red Sea; many had established the borders of what would become, in 1948, the Jewish state. Kibbutzes could be as small as 80 members or as large as 2,000. They ran collective economies, often described as "the purest form of communism in the Western world," uncorrupted by the police-state bureaucracies that ruled Russia, China and Cuba. Every year, thousands of young travellers passed through the gates of the frontier farms and lived together briefly, and intensely, as volunteers. By the late 1980s, volunteering on a kibbutz had reached a peak of popularity; the 1985 film *Not Quite Paradise*—a hammy romantic-comedy by the British

director of *Educating Rita* and *The Spy Who Loved Me*—dramatized the clash of cultures between rough-edged Israeli kibbutzniks and over-sexed, hard-drinking backpackers.

I'd never been political, and if all I'd wanted was a rural sabbatical, my prairie uncles could have put me to work on their wheat farm. The kibbutz, however, promised an exotic land filled with history, adventure and camaraderie, far from my own romantic failures. I'd been raised on Sunday school stories, too, and still had a fascination with the ancient geographical names of the Bible: *Gethsemane*, *Golgotha*, *Galilee*. In Hebrew, David meant "beloved." That seemed a good sign, too. And it was a chance to live, however briefly, like a true utopian.

My friends threw a going-away party. Or rather they invited me to drop by the same parent-free townhouse where, every Friday night for the past three years, we gathered in the basement to shotgun six-packs of beer, watch a VHS bootleg of *The Breakfast Club* and renew the great Ally-Sheedy-versus-Molly-Ringwald debate that had paralyzed a generation. When I arrived, they presented me with a handcrafted goodbye gift: a joint the size of a baby's arm. Sadly, they knew as much about street drugs as they did about contemporary cinema. The fat wand of loose tobacco was so parsimoniously seeded with rat turds of low-grade suburban hash that it was less a monster joint than the *representation* of a monster joint, a dim Platonic shadow of a mega-doobie. It didn't matter: they had only rolled it for the placebo effect. As the evening grew hazier, a high-school acquaintance interrogated my motives for dropping out of school to live in Israel. "Why are you throwing away your life—" he shouted, inches from my face "—for a *girl*?"

I passed around an address book for postcards I knew I would never write. Days later, in the airport departure zone, an Israeli security agent from El Al Airlines scattered the contents of my backpack across a steel table. My mother had sewn a red maple leaf into the top corner of the pack; the fabric talisman was meant to confer diplomatic

immunity upon all young Canadians abroad, mostly by proving you weren't American. Now on public display, the net worth of my newly transient life ranged from the pretentious (a paperback copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*) to the pathetic (long bandoliers of Trojan condoms; hope, amongst other things, sprang eternal). But the agent's suspicion was piqued by my address book.

He pointed to an open page. "Who is Massoud Falsometer?"

I blanked. I'd never heard the name. What was it doing in my book? Then I recognized the handwriting. Under the letter *F*, a friend had scribbled an Arabic-sounding pen name.

I explained to the skeptical agent that, honestly, I didn't know a Mr. Falsometer. That, no, he hadn't given me any "packages" to transport. That, in fact, he probably didn't exist. That the person who had entered the address was a Kyle from Quebec, not a Massoud from the Middle East. That the name was a gag. ("Falsometer, get it?") A joke at my expense.

The agent's glare darkened. "What kind of joke is that?"

Good question. How could I explain to this dour gatekeeper the emotionally stunted rituals of the North American male? I barely understood them myself.

I'd tried to leave early from my going-away party. But the host wouldn't let me escape. He grappled me in a sumo hold and demanded I stay. I resisted. He resisted back. Robert Bly and *Iron John* were still two years off, so this is what passed for a man-hug in the late-'80s. We caromed off kitchen counters and through the screen door and down the back steps and into the small yard of his absentee parents. We scrummed, laughing mirthlessly, until I felt too tired to care. We staggered backwards and crashed through the sliding metal doors of a garden shed. There we lay, panting, limbs tangled amid corroded rakes and pruning shears. Our fraternal farewell consummated in blood, my friend dusted off his jeans and left me sprawled in the dark.

At least, I thought—pinned in the broken embrace of a hardware-store cabana, hypnotized by the vertiginous dance of the autumn stars above me—at least, I knew, *wherever I was going couldn't be any more fucked up than where I was leaving.*

Of course, even about this, I was so very wrong.

“Are you Jewish?”

I've fielded that question since running away to the kibbutz. My blond crewcut and boiled-ham pigmentation suggest *my* people weren't chosen by anyone other than sunscreen marketers. I grew up Catholic and lapsed a few years before leaving for Israel. My knowledge of the Promised Land got fuzzy after the first century A.D. In my mind, Jerusalem didn't extend beyond the walls of the Old City; Bethlehem and Nazareth were the other metropolises, while sandalled disciples netted fish from the Sea of Galilee to go with their loaves. The Holy Land had likely been touched up since its Biblical heyday, but I didn't have a precise image in my head.

I had serious homework to do. Before I left, I arranged a letter of introduction from the Jewish Community Centre. The coordinator set me in front of a *Welcome to Israel!* VHS tape and gave me a few brochures that showcased a romantic image of kibbutz life. Swarthy men and women bent over shovels in orchards and cotton fields, shaded by white sun hats and kerchiefs, sleeves rolled on proletarian-blue work shirts. Muscled legs stretched short-shorts that would make Kareem Abdul-Jabbar blush. Kibbutzniks, I learned, were the native-born descendants of pioneers who had left Eastern Europe for Palestine in the early 20th century, inspired by the utopian dreams of socialism and Zionism, the conjoined philosophies of Karl Marx and Theodor Herzl. They'd been promised “a land without a people

for a people without a land”—a sales pitch that turned out to be only half-true. In the epic of the kibbutz, the first pioneers had abandoned Europe’s stifling and persecuted Jewish *shtetls* to live in secular communes. They governed their relations by direct democracy and absolute economic equality. Everyone shared everything, from their profits to their boots. Everyone voted on everything, no matter how minor—and the majority ruled. Together, the young idealists built a nation out of swamp and rock. They settled the frontier and defended its future borders. They were Hebrew Marlboro Men with Marxist leanings.

The kibbutz was most famous for the “children’s house” in which kids were raised collectively, separated from their parents except for pre-dinner visits of an hour or two. In co-ed groups, they studied and played, ate and slept, all under the care of the *metapelet* or “nanny.” The communal childcare system freed women to contribute fully to the economic, political and social life of the kibbutz while also teaching children the spirit of collective enterprise. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, psychologists studied Israel’s experiment in communal child-raising; in 1969, Bruno Bettelheim published *The Children of the Dream*, in which he concludes the kibbutz “clearly reached its own goal: to create a radically new personality in a single generation.”

By 1988, kibbutz brochures played down these socialist experiments. Communism wasn’t a big draw for backpackers. Most volunteers came to Israel instead for the lusty promise, as one volunteer coordinator told me, of “sun, sand and sex.” The brochures had air-brushed away mentions of wars and terrorism, but I couldn’t ignore the headlines: the West Bank and Gaza, captured by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967, had erupted in clashes between Palestinian youths and the Israeli army. Thrown rocks versus rubber bullets. Molotov cocktails against live rounds. The protesters called the uprising an *intifada*, or “throwing off” in Arabic. I was walking into the thick of it.

After finishing the paperwork, the JCC coordinator asked for a favour. Could I deliver a care package for a friend in Israel? He gave me three hefty plastic bottles, stout as table lamps, filled with Head & Shoulders, at least according to the labels. “You can’t get it over there,” he said with a shrug. I left Canada in a late-October snowstorm and arrived in Israel to waves of heat shimmering off the tarmac. I disembarked, grabbed my backpack, stepped through the airport’s sliding doors and felt the thick air chest-bump me. A corridor of faces barked greetings and thrust hand-scrawled cardboard signs. My dry eyes blinked, but the lettering refused to snap into focus until I realized, *It’s all Hebrew to me now.*

By the time I reached Tel Aviv, I’d sweated through my T-shirt under the weight of the contraband shampoo. Scooters and *sherut* minibuses honked in the low canyons of dirty white buildings. Soldiers and street hawkers, businessmen and beach-goers flooded the sidewalks. Young women strolled together in olive army uniforms with Uzis slung like Gucci bags over their arms. I felt a clammy light-headedness, a jet-lagged dislocation, as I stepped out of the sun into the low-lit cloister of the kibbutz office.

I presented the introduction letter to the head of the volunteer department. He asked me to show my visa. Then he studied a list of kibbutzes looking for volunteers. “Where do you want to go?” It sounded like a philosophical query. “The north, the centre or the south?”

I stared at a map on the wall. Tel Aviv was in the middle, and I could feel myself dissolving in its heat. The south—and the expanse of the Negev Desert—would be hotter. My eyes drifted upwards till I spotted the cool blue bulb of the Sea of Galilee.

“The north,” I replied.

“*Shamir*,” he declared.

His finger traced a route up from Tel Aviv, past Haifa, and skirted the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, where I expected it to stop, but

it then climbed the thin line of the Jordan River into a funnel of land near the top of the country. An inch or two below its edge, I noticed *Shamir* in small script and the bolder-faced names of its neighbours: *Lebanon, Syria, Golan*. That evening, I caught a bus for Kiryat Shmona, the nearest town to the kibbutz. As we drove into the dusk, young soldiers dozed in nearby seats, nestled like lovers against their rifles. By heading north, I realized, I had dodged the heat but not the fire.



A second bus dropped me at Kibbutz Shamir in the dark. I was issued a room in a tin-roofed cabin and fell into a distracted slumber on a thin slab of foam. High-pitched cries outside my door haunted my first sleep, like a serenade of gremlins. (Mongooses, I learned.) Eight hours later, I rolled off the cot, threw open the door and confronted a vista that remains embedded in my memory. A smudge of red and yellow spread across a gently serrated ridge, the rest of the valley in shadow. The sun seemed about to launch from behind these western mountains until the light exploded over my shoulder instead, leaping off the high ground to the east. It wouldn't be the last time this land fooled my senses. The warming air burned off the hovering mist and revealed the tributaries that fed the Jordan River. I discerned orthogonal irrigation pools and fishponds, a patchwork of orchards and fields. I heard birdsong, a tractor's engine coughing to life. That first dawn, Kibbutz Shamir delivered its promise of a pastoral escape from my troubles back home. I was hooked.

Ami, the kibbutz's volunteer coordinator, arrived in an electric cart. My new boss was in his thirties but looked older. He was shorter than me by a foot and walked with a high-kneed march, his large puppet's head topped with a swoop of thinning blond hair. He suffered from a genetic condition that accelerated his body's aging—that was the

rumour. Ami gave a tour of the kibbutz. A ring road formed a wobbly ovoid on the slopes of the valley, with sidewalks spoking into a central hub, a common kibbutz design. On the westernmost downslope was the volunteers' district, better known as the Upper and Lower Ghetto, with three long bungalows that each housed four rooms, a few smaller duplexes, a concrete bunker for communal showers and bathrooms and a small cabin with a TV, fridge, card table and sagging sofa. To the north were the swimming pool, sports hall and apiary. To the south, the industrial district contained two factories, the chicken sheds and cattle barns. On the high ground to the east, kibbutzniks lived in tree-shaded pocket neighbourhoods of connected bungalows. Ami and I followed a path into the core of the kibbutz—cars were shared by members and kept to the ring road. We passed the volunteers' pub, the small general store, the main office with a pay phone on its outdoor wall, the children's house and finally the centre of the entire community: the dining hall and industrial kitchen. Here, members ate, danced and voted in a shared space.

As we walked, Ami retold the history of his home, both kibbutz and country. A handful of young pioneers, mostly from Romania, had founded the kibbutz in 1944. They were Marxists, members of a socialist youth group demanding a challenge, so they were sent to land purchased in the cartographic extrusion known as the Finger of Galilee; the kibbutz occupied the final knuckle. They named their new home Shamir, "The Rock" in Hebrew, after the great chunks of limestone they had to clear before they could lay foundations or till fields. It felt like a true frontier. "We are right on the edge of the Golan Heights," Ami said, gesturing at the slope to the east. I didn't grasp the significance.

Even after Israel's independence and the armistice of 1949, he explained, the Syrian army had shelled Shamir from the high ground of the Golan; border soldiers took potshots from their outposts at kibbutzniks in the fields. Everything changed in 1967 with the

pre-emptive attack of the Six-Day War. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) overran Syrian positions and pushed across the Heights until Israel occupied roughly 1,200 square kilometres of strategic high ground. (To the south, the IDF captured the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which collectively became known as the Occupied Territories.) In 1981, the Israeli parliament extended Israeli law and administration through the Golan, an act of quasi-annexation unrecognized by the international community. The UN has maintained a peacekeeping force in the Golan since 1974. The capture of the Heights, said Ami, made life on his kibbutz more peaceful. Most men on the kibbutz, he told me, had fought in one or more of Israel's six major wars. And yet Ami could see both sides, the long view, the road beyond the conflict. That, too, was the philosophy of the kibbutz movement, one of the nation's most progressive political forces. "If we want peace with the Arabs," Ami said, "Israel will have to give up some of the Territories." It would prove to be a hard promise to fulfill.



After Ami's primer, my political education took a backseat to the routines and rotation of kibbutz work. I had to earn my three meals a day, my nights on a foam mattress in a bare cabin, my weekly ration of toiletries and cigarettes, the 30 shekels a month added to my bar tab. Shamir had roughly 500 members, a mid-sized kibbutz. No task was too menial for a kibbutznik—and certainly not for a volunteer. Everyone pitched in for the common good. Managers of work branches requested extra hands, and Ami assigned volunteers to different jobs on a weekly cycle: the kitchen, the communal daycare, the old-age home, the chicken run, the cattle sheds, the optical or the fabric factory, the vegetable or flower gardens, the cotton fields, the apple, kiwi or avocado orchards in the valley.

At any one time, Shamir hosted 15 to 30 foreign volunteers or “vol-lies.” We lived together (and slept together) in our warren of crude cabins with beige walls and tin roofs. We ate together and gossiped (mostly in English) in the noisy main dining room with a huge wall hanging that read (also in English): *We Are All One Woven Humanity*. From my first meal to my last beer, I was surrounded by a Babel of languages I’d rarely heard before: Hebrew, of course, but also Dutch, German, Spanish, Danish, Portuguese, Arabic, Afrikaans, as well as global variations of spoken English nearly as puzzling. The volunteer ghetto felt like a student-run United Nations with more booze and less corruption. I became fluent in no single foreign tongue but learned to curse and flirt in several. A quarter-century later, I can recite the lyrics to a Swedish drinking song and whisper, “*Ska vi älska?*”—“Shall we make love?”—an essential kibbutz skill.

My first assignment was to operate the industrial dishwashing machine, a steam-spouting dragon’s mouth with a conveyor-belt tongue into which diners fed plates, cutlery and trays after every meal. It was a smelly, noisy, messy job—and one assigned to every kibbutznik as a reminder to stay humble. I scrubbed the huge steel pots and pans and climbed into the dragon’s belly to extract a loose fork jamming its mechanism. A week later, I graduated to kitchen duty, running chores for Yaffa, the diminutive and vocal head cook, a chihuahua in an apron, who barked, “*Yalla! Yalla!*”—“Hurry! Hurry!”—as we hustled hot food to the hungry workers in the dining room. Afterwards, I pulled on thick elbow-length rubber gloves like a hazmat worker’s, walked into an industrial oven as tall as a phone booth stucco’d with a week’s worth of carbonized meat sauces, and slopped its blackened walls with an acidic brown jelly that ate quickly through my apron and jeans and then, more slowly, through my skin.

I welcomed my reassignment to the orchards, where I earned the nickname “Monkey Man” by shimmying up the high branches to

retrieve avocados. Autumn gave way to winter; mornings dawned cold and rainy—no sun, no sand, not nearly enough sex—and the summer-browned valley turned green again. Snow descended the ski slopes of Mt. Hermon to the north. I shuffled between the optical factory and fieldwork. We dug irrigation trenches in the mud of the apple orchards, pruned the bare limbs of kiwi trees and burned stubble from the cotton harvest until the leaping flames singed the hair from our forearms, and our faces turned coal-miner black with soot. At shift's end, I returned to the volunteer ghetto with my work clothes and canvas boots scuffed and torn, my body aching, ravenous, bruised and often bloodied—and more alive than I'd felt in years.

It wasn't all work. Tuesday nights, the sports hall screened subtitled Hollywood hits, foreign movies and Israeli films. We played basketball, floor hockey and Ping-Pong, or gathered in the common room to holler at the heroes and villains of American wrestling on Jordanian TV. We signed up for Hebrew lessons and took out English books from the kibbutz library; I devoured Israeli military history and indulged a brief obsession, common to angsty young men, with the "philosophy" of Ayn Rand, reading *The Virtue of Selfishness* on a socialist commune. Friday nights, kibbutzniks swapped blue work uniforms for pressed shirts, while volunteers got dolled up from the collection of flared slacks and paisley blouses left behind by generations of backpackers. The kibbutz reunited in the dining room for Shabbat dinner and the weekly miracle in which industrial urns of tap water instead dispensed gallons of cheap white wine. At the Friday night meal, we saw the whole kibbutz—and they saw us. Families who lived on the far side of Shamir; middle-aged bosses from the orchards and factories; and greying seniors, hunched over their trays, who glanced skeptically at the table of loud volunteers refilling jugs of wine. Later, the Volly Bar swelled with a rowdy mix of young backpackers and kibbutzniks—many just finished their three years of mandatory army service—all shouting over the tinny stereo.

Past midnight, we scrawled our names and nationalities and bar-room boasts across the rainbow mural of the bunker's back wall. Then we staggered into an old grain elevator that kibbutzniks had turned into a disco and danced until our knees ached. Saturday mornings, we slept off hangovers and idled on the shaded porches of our cabins. Afternoons, we played soccer with kibbutzniks or rugby against tattooed British soccer hooligans from another kibbutz in the valley.

Aside from a handful of Orthodox communities, kibbutzes were largely secular institutions. There was no synagogue on Shamir, and I never saw a *kippa* on any man's head. But kibbutzes adapted traditional Jewish holidays into a seasonal cycle of community gatherings: the harvest festivals of Sukkot and Shavu'ot; Yom Kippur, with its tart memory of the surprise attack in 1973 by the armies of Egypt and Syria; Channukah, Purim and Passover—celebrations of Jewish uprisings and exoduses. For Christmas, kibbutzniks surprised volunteers with a pig to roast from an Arab butcher in Nazareth; kosher laws made it illegal for Israeli Jews to raise pigs. A bearded British expat kibbutznik named Johnny dressed as Santa on Christmas Eve and let us perch on his lap as we exchanged gifts—I got a box of Earl Grey and a styrofoam toy glider—and sang off-key (and off-colour) carols into the night. For the Super Bowl, I joined the two others who cared about American football and watched the 49ers beat the Bengals.

I fell into the rhythms of volunteer life. I gossiped around the volunteers' table in the dining room: who was mad at whom, who had slept with whom, who was leaving—and who might be arriving. I savoured the casual encounters with foreign friends and Israeli acquaintances as I walked the quiet grounds of the car-free inner campus or jogged its ring road to sweat off the beer and cigarettes. The work was hard but broken up by camaraderie, as kibbutzniks and volunteers cracked jokes over tea breaks. I felt part of a community, even if my tenure was temporary. I could ignore the dangers beyond the fences, the troubles we read about

in the morning paper—most of the time.

One week, though, I was assigned to clean the bomb shelters. Why now? Was there a threat they weren't telling us about? The shelters were scattered across the kibbutz and looked like concrete phone booths with steel doors, ventilation pipes and stone steps that descended into the dark. I found one shelter half-flooded and uninhabitable; in another, a teenaged punk band had cleared the cots and added a drum kit for a jam studio.

I knew the kibbutz had been touched by tragedy. In 1974, four Palestinian terrorists had crossed from Lebanon, armed with guns, grenades, explosives, a map with several potential targets, including Shamir, and leaflets demanding the release of a hundred Palestinian prisoners. The ultimate goal was the dining hall, where a dawn attack might capture dozens of hostages. "We love death," read a note carried by one militant, "as you love life." On the morning of June 13, 1974, the gunmen crept into the kibbutz near the bee house but were spotted by two members—one was grazed by a bullet as he retreated to warn others. Kibbutzniks rushed from breakfast with the weapons they brought to work each day, and Uzi Tsur, a paratrooper, shot and killed two of the intruders. The remaining terrorists exchanged fire with kibbutz members and died in a siege of the apiary after the army arrived, when the entire building exploded. By then, the Palestinians had killed three women: two kibbutzniks, including a pregnant mother, and Judi Sinton, a 18-year-old volunteer from New Zealand. The deaths made headlines in Israel as well as New Zealand and led the evening news in the United States; President Nixon was visiting the Middle East and the attack may have been an attempt to overshadow his diplomacy. "The terrorists have demonstrated their suicidal determination to attract attention to the Palestinian cause," observed a CBS reporter, at the "honey-producing village" of Shamir, after interviewing Defence Minister Shimon Peres near the burnt-out remains of the bee house. "The commandos who

took part in the raid,” noted a writer for *Time* magazine, “were dressed in the headbands and cloaks that many young Western hippies wear when they stop to work at such kibbutzim.”

Fifteen years later, the attack loomed large in the mythology of Shamir. Ami told me the story on my first day. My friend Yoav had been a young boy in the children’s house sprayed with bullets; his father, an artist, heard the warning in the dining room and photographed the fire-fight and aftermath. On the kibbutz, we walked past the sculpture built by the grieving husband of the young mother killed by the terrorists. Any one of us could be next—that was the message. We were visitors in a divided land. And we needed to choose sides.

Twice a year, kibbutz leaders relieved volunteers of work duties for a five-day road trip to the Red Sea resort of Eilat and back again. We would sleep outdoors and in hostels. We would stop at tourist highlights: the Dead Sea, the Ein Gedi nature reserve, the citadel of Masada, the Old City of Jerusalem, the Bedouin market in Be’er Sheva. The autumn trip rewarded volunteers for harvesting the cotton and apples, the avocados and kiwis. The cargo space of an old yellow school bus was filled with sleeping bags, potato chips and instant soup, sacks of vegetables and rattling cases of cheap Israeli beer. Our chaperones packed guns. Heading south, down the Jordan Valley, our bus approached Jericho, the oldest surviving city in the world and a flashpoint in a modern conflict. In Israel, voters were heading to the polls in the ugly autumn election of 1988. The political rancour centered on how to contain the Palestinian uprising. The right-wing Likud Party advocated military suppression of the stone-throwing protesters. The centre-left Labor Party sought concessions in exchange for peace. Days before the balloting, an act of violence inflamed the nation.

On a Sunday evening, a public bus with nearly two dozen passengers approached Jericho and the driver slowed to avoid boulders strewn across the highway. Suddenly, two gasoline-filled bottles smashed the rear window, and the bus erupted into flame. Passengers scrambled for exits or clawed through broken glass. A 26-year-old mother and her three children died in the attack, and a soldier succumbed to smoke inhalation. The attack provoked national outrage. The army imposed a curfew on Jericho until three Palestinians confessed, and then soldiers destroyed their families' houses and bulldozed orchards they'd used as cover for the attack. "This tragedy," lamented a Labor Party official, "couldn't have come at a worse time."

Our volunteer expedition passed Jericho a week after the incident. At checkpoints, our laughter dimmed as hard-eyed IDF officers stared into our windows before we accelerated onto the highway again. I realized how little I knew about this land beyond the rural isolation of the kibbutz.

A day later, we stopped at the Bedouin market in the desert city of Be'er Sheva and posed for photographs beside the camels. I haggled badly to buy a souvenir *keffiyeh*, a checkered Arab scarf with a tasseled headband, and looped it around my brow in an attempt at Mideast chic. A Bedouin man spotted me and ran beside our bus, pointing at the pale foreigner in the headgear of the PLO leader, as he laughed and chanted, "Ar-a-fat! Ar-a-fat! Ar-a-fat!" At Yad Vashem, we moved in silence through the memorials and physical remnants of the Holocaust, the bodies turned to ash, the bureaucratic paperwork of the Final Solution. An exhibition titled *6,000,001* reminded us that the unfathomable depth of the Nazis' slaughter was the sum of individual human lives snuffed out one by one. In a Jerusalem ice cream store, one of our chaperones sat transfixed by a documentary about the Holocaust on a small black-and-white TV while the younger guide flirted with an Australian volunteer. "How they must fear another explosion of hatred toward the

Jews like in Nazi Germany,” I wrote in my diary. “The life of a Jew, an Israeli even more, must be a wary existence, knowing that should he let his guard down, his entire race may be extinguished from the face of the globe, by the newly risen Hitler, by the pressure of Arab hatred, by the apathy of the world.”

We descended into the Old City’s crowded and shadowy arcades. Narrow shopfronts displayed racks of tourist T-shirts, bootleg cassette tapes, handmade jewellery, oddly shaped fruits and vegetables I couldn’t identify. The throaty calls of shopkeepers and Arabic music pumped through ghetto blasters echoed down corridors filled with the tangy smells of Turkish coffee and grilled meat. The ancient area code has a reputation for short-circuiting the imagination. Psychologists label it the Jerusalem Syndrome, a psychosis (or “spiritual intoxication”) that overcomes visitors with delusions of saintly revelation in this crossroads of major faiths. “Jerusalem sadness” is how novelist Arthur Koestler describes his first trip to the Old City. “The angry face of Yahweh is brooding over hot rocks,” he wrote, “which have seen more holy murder, rape and plunder than any other place on earth.” Amos Oz, who grew up in the city, is more blunt: “Jerusalem is an old nymphomaniac who squeezes lover after lover to death before shrugging him off her with a yawn, a black widow who devours her mates while they are still penetrating her.” Ouch.

On our visit, we watched gaggles of Christian pilgrims, mostly European, imitate their saviour’s final journey down the Via Dolorosa, clutching rosaries as men dragged thick wooden crosses. Some had training wheels, which seemed like cheating on the “Way of Pain.” Ultra-Orthodox boys dashed up stone stairs, a blur of black and white, side curls bouncing behind their ears. Faith ebbed and flowed through the stone labyrinth that joined the Christian, Muslim, Armenian and Jewish quarters. Every step down the city’s cobbled streets pitched me back a century. Time came unmoored, only to be jerked back to

earth by a stern Haredi Jew who wagged a finger at Mandy, a British volunteer with a zoned-out smiley face on her T-shirt and the words *Shit Happens!*

“*Not* in the Holy City!” he chastened.

We laughed like kids caught smoking by the school janitor. Looking back, I feel a pang of shame at our blithe youth, how we snapped photos of devotees deep in prayer at the Western Wall or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, how we gawked like visitors in a zoo at the accoutrements and genuflections of faiths we would never understand.

Shit *did* happen in the Holy City, though. It happened all the time. On this trip, the city was tense with rumours the PLO might announce Palestinian statehood. Squads of Israeli soldiers rushed down alleyways, rifles to chests, and demanded ID papers from Arab men. In a jewellery shop in the Christian Quarter, I haggled over a necklace for my hometown high school ex-sweetheart until the proprietor glanced at his watch and grew anxious. Yasser Arafat had called a half-day strike and if the shopkeeper kept his doors open past noon, he could face the wrath of PLO enforcers. We sealed the deal, and he slammed the shutters.

I entered the grounds of the Temple Mount, site of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Noble Sanctuary of the Muslim faith and landing pad for the prophet Muhammad’s angel-guided “night journey” from Mecca to Jerusalem. The walls supporting the golden dome were mosaicked in sea blue and turquoise and a vibrant turtle green, a fractal network of tiles with stylized Koranic scripture scrolling across the upper panels. A middle-aged Arab guide talked me through the history as I stood in torn Reeboks and army-surplus pants, a shoulder-length blond mullet feathering out of a Labatt Blue ballcap, the very incarnation of the ugly North American. We looked down into a stone-walled backyard, where a scrum of boys was playing. I turned my attention back to the guide and—*ziiing!*—a rock, thrown with the force and precision of a split-finger fastball, struck me in the back of the

cap. My eyes watered with pain as the guide scolded the boys in Arabic. Only later did I think of the perfect novelty T-shirt: *I Got Stoned at the Dome of the Rock!* At the time, all that ran through my aching head was *What the hell am I doing here?*

I had planned to work on a kibbutz for a month or two and move on. I wanted to explore the Middle East and the Mediterranean. See the world. But Shamir seduced me into prolonging my stay—and so did my fellow volunteers. I fell in and out of love. I hitchhiked up and down the country. I returned to Jerusalem as often as I could. Eight months later, as summer approached, Ami learned of my past as a lifeguard and offered a position at the kibbutz pool. It would be an easy job compared to polishing lenses in the optical factory or pulling rocks from the cotton fields. Some volunteers had stuck around for a year or longer. A few barstool conversations had blossomed into kibbutz marriages. Israel would always be a dangerous place but life was good in the Hula Valley.

I considered a career as the poolside hero in a socialist utopia. And then I declined.

It was time to go home.