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On collective assertiveness and activism during the immigration process: a case study of Yemenite immigrants who founded Kiryat Shmona – 1949–1953

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This article seeks to shed light on a dimension in the absorption process of the large wave of immigration to the newly-founded State of Israel, which has hitherto received but limited coverage in historical and sociological writing. I will analyze and review the history of a single group of immigrants (olim) comprising over 200 families, whose story best reveals the unaddressed dimension of immigrant activism – the actual immigrants in the process of their integration into Israeli society, their power and influence over their own lives.

The discussion on the absorption of new immigrants at large and Mizrahim (Jews who immigrated from Middle Eastern countries) in particular was often characterized by a dichotomous presentation. On one side, there are the absorbers – the veteran immigrants. They are characterized by their activism, and are portrayed as having full control over events. The more veteran Israelis are not a politically homogenous group, and the study points to the internal divisions between them over questions relating to the absorption of the Great Aliya (the large immigration wave, during the 1950s). Thus, for instance, emphasis is drawn to the disagreement among the veterans over the nature of the education that immigrants should receive, the financial burden that the immigration wave would impose on the more veteran population and the political inclination behind the absorption process.¹ On the other side were the immigrants, were often described as characterized by passivity. They were considered to have exercised only a minimal influence on their integration process.

In academic and public discourse, there are those who consider the new immigrants as the absolute victims of Zionism or of its ruling Labor Movement.² Others consider them as lucky and regard the hurdles and injustices they faced as a necessary by-product of the immigration processes and the socio-economic reality of the young state of Israel.³ Yet, it seems that both notions are based on the assumption that the new immigrants were, at least in the formative years of the state, passive people who had no impact on the reality of their lives. I shall argue that this assumption misses the complexity of historical reality, as I shall seek to demonstrate by analyzing the history of a group of Yemenite immigrants who established the town of Kiryat Shmona, near the northern border of Israel. I will focus on the manner in which they functioned as a group in the immigration process and attempt, through an analysis of this case study, to contribute to the trend that seeks to tell the historical narrative from the vantage point of the immigrant group and not from the perspective of the absorbing establishment alone.

The affair which is the subject of this article may have amounted to a tale of weakness and victimhood: hundreds of immigrants who made aliya to Israel from a remote country in the southwestern Arabian Peninsula were sent, a few months later, to the far northern periphery of Israel. They were compelled to integrate into an environment vastly dominated by the

economically-powerful kibbutzim, who belonged to a European culture that was regarded as superior and to the political hegemony of the Labor Movement.

But the story that emerges from the affair, as I will demonstrate, is not one of passive victimhood *vis-à-vis* the migration process. The historical sources show that the Yemenites of Kiryat Shmona were revealed to be a cohesive, opinionated, determined and stubborn group that succeeded, under difficult circumstances, in letting its voice be heard, struggled for its values and identity, effected major changes in the absorption system and, eventually, came together and left in an organized fashion to establish new agricultural settlements that would better suit its will and lifestyle.

The choice to unfold the historical narrative not only from the vantage point of the absorbing establishment, but mainly from the perspective of the migrant olim necessitates an appropriate corpus of sources. In some of the cases, I tried to extract the voice of the group of Yemenite immigrants from their own texts. These were found in the press descriptions of the time, in the archives of Upper Galilee kibbutzim and of political parties. The study is mainly based on primary sources preserved in various archives in Israel, primarily the Israel State Archive (hereafter, ISA) and the Moshe Sharett Labor Party Archive (hereafter, LPA), whereby dozens of letters sent by that group to the government of Israel and Mapai (acronym for the Workers' Party of the Land of Israel) could be found. To complete the picture, I also resorted to interviews conducted in recent years with those who were teenage youths at the time, and also alluded to their memoirs. On the basis of these wide-ranging sources, I will present the manner in which these immigrants regarded and interpreted the events, and will unfold the ways in which they fought back against trends that ran counter to their identity and interests.

The Yemenite immigrants constituted a unique group of Middle Eastern (Mizrahim) immigrants in several aspects. Yemenite immigrants had already made aliya from the earliest days of Zionism and throughout the Mandate period. As a result, their historical record is extensive *vis-à-vis* that of other Jewish communities from Asia and North Africa, and the discussion on their integration into Israel arose relatively early as well.

The available research exhibits several cases where the Yemenis resisted authorities, even if their efforts did not meet with success. However, most of the historical discourse revolves, also in the case of Yemenite Jews, around the policy and stance of those in charge of their absorption, around the image of Yemenite Jews and the question of the injustice committed against them.⁴

A noteworthy outcome of the relatively early immigration from Yemen to the Jewish Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine during the British Mandate) was the development of various activist bodies among these relatively veteran Yemenite immigrants, such as the 'Yemenite Association' and the departments for Yemenite Jews that operated within Mapai and the Histadrut (the General Organization of Workers in Israel). The existence of a nationwide support network, which displayed some measure of effectiveness, provided some of the 50,000 Yemenite immigrants who arrived in the wake of the establishment of the state with better conditions in which to speak out and take action in order to realize their interests. Against that backdrop, there is a growing need to regard them not merely as passive immigrants but also as legitimate and influential actors in and upon Israeli society.

The first signs of an attempt to look beyond the stereotypical images of passive immigrants featured in some of the studies. Adriana Kemp portrayed their abandonment of the transit camps (*ma'abarot*) and the immigrant rural settlements (*moshavim*) as active 'civilian resistance'. She mainly focused on the actions of individuals or families that refused to acquiesce to the 'immigration dispersion' policy despite the enforcement and punitive measures adopted by the resettling institutions.⁵ Few studies in recent years have presented various aspects of activism among groups of new immigrants: Esther Meir Glitzenstein (first) and Orit Bashkin (recently) discussed immigrants arriving from Iraq. They pointed to the patterns of organization and political

activity of Iraqi immigrants and on the contribution of their activism to their successful integration into Israeli society.

The Iraqi aliya was presented, by and large, as being similar to that of European immigrants and as exceptional *vis-à-vis* immigrants from other countries in Asia and Africa.⁶ Orit Rozin analyzed the protest activities held in the early 1950s by organized immigrant groups who sought to improve the conditions of their absorption. She emphasized their sense that, as newly-arrived immigrants, they were able to partake in shaping society, and pointed to the network of listeners who paid heed to their voice.⁷

These groups, from the transit camps near Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, geared the democratic infrastructure in Israel in order to protest and demonstrate against their living conditions. In the context of the Yemenite Jews, Eraki Klorman, who analyzed the two-faced attitude on the part of several organizations within the Jewish settlement (such as the workers' parties and the moshavot (colonies)) towards them, also related to the Yemenite immigrants' political struggle for their rights.⁸

Following this new trend in historiography, this article seeks to contribute to the presentation of the period in a more complex manner and to reveal the immigrants' point of view, their mode of organization, their struggle and success – even if partial – to make an impact on their integration process in their new country. The group of Yemenite immigrant founders of Kiryat Shmona, which constitutes the focal point of this article, was not homogenous. The immigrants came from a number of villages in Yemen; following their arrival, they settled in Israel in various immigrants' camps (mainly Ein Shemer, Beit Lid and Atlit), and gradually reached Kiryat Shmona. On 18 July 1949, the first 14 families arrived and settled in the homes of Arabs who had been expelled from their village. Within the next few months, several small groups came, and in the spring and summer of 1950, they numbered over 200 families. The settlement was initially named 'Kiryat Yosef' and finally 'Kiryat Shmona', but in the early years it was known as 'Khalsa'; therefore, I will mention these three names throughout my article. As time went by, the settlement became a transit camp out of which a town emerged. I will focus, in what follows, on three successful struggles undertaken by the group of Kiryat Shmona founders among the Yemenite immigrants, and will examine the tools and resources that helped them pave an independent path for themselves within the highly-challenging process of their absorption in the new country.

First successful struggle – the dethronement of the transit camp's director

The first example of the actions undertaken by the Kiryat Shmona Yemenite founders, of their strength and influence on unfolding events comes to the fore in their relationship with Eliezer Krol, who was, in fact, the transit camp's director. Krol was one of the Upper-Galilee leaders and among the founders of the veteran kibbutz Kfar Giladi, a revered and dominant figure who had assumed a mythical status as a member of *HaShomer* (The Watchman) – the early Jewish defense organization established in Eretz Israel at the turn of the century. He mustered up to accompany the new immigrants who came to Al Khalisa, administered the place and served as liaison *vis-à-vis* the manifold bodies involved with the new settlement.⁹ Lo and behold, despite Krol's seniority, political power, and his connections with national institutions, the Kiryat Shmona Yemenites waged war against him and even managed to banish him from the transit camp. What led the new immigrants to struggle against the person in charge of their absorption? Sources reveal that Krol related to the inhabitants as to an immature population unprepared to run the settlement on their own. Although he set up a five-member committee in an attempt to foster the immigrants' involvement in local life, he, nevertheless, treated them as children. After one of the meetings he had convened with the residents, he added a comment next to his brief report on the meeting 'as if explaining to children'.¹⁰ A few weeks later, when Krol's assistant

was forced to leave the transit camp, Krol wrote in his diary: 'It is out of the question to appoint a Yemenite settler for such position'.¹¹ Furthermore, two of the most significant decisions in the first year of the new settlement were taken without any consultation with the local inhabitants.

Towards the end of 1949 and in early 1950, there was debate, in both the government-planning administration and Upper Galilee kibbutzim, about whether to establish an agricultural or an urban settlement in Al Khalisa. Without delving into the various considerations, it is worth noting that the decision was taken according to a phone survey, in which all the kibbutzim of the region took part. Meanwhile, the Yemenite immigrants were not asked at all for their opinion on the nature of the settlement they had established and had inhabited for several months.¹² About six months later, a debate arose regarding the name of the new settlement. Neither the founding local Yemenites nor their committee took part in these talks, even though some of them had been serving as committee members for an entire year. It was the Upper Galilee Regional Council that approved the 'names committee' proposal to change the name from Kiryat Yosef to Kiryat Shmona.¹³ The exclusion of the settlers from the decision-making processes on fundamental and symbolic issues was an expression of Krol's attitude toward them as objects and his lack of trust in their ability to lead, take charge and take part in shaping the settlement that they established. The families' dissatisfaction with Krol had exacerbated both as a result of the harsh physical conditions and the various defective services in the new settlement. These difficult circumstances were understandable at times of mass absorption in the young state, but the communication between the new residents and those responsible for them did not succeed either. I would like to emphasize, at this point, the resolute and assertive response of the new immigrants: they expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation in the area and with Krol's attitude towards those who had arrived in Al Khalisa,¹⁴ and even summoned to Al Khalisa, as a support network, activists from the Yemenite immigrant department in Mapai.¹⁵ They made Shimon Avizemer – one of the activists in the department – privy to their growing frustration in the face of the absence of regular medical services in the community and the lack of steady jobs. Mainly, they expressed their plea for the daily needs of the remote community to be met:

It is yourselves who sent us to settle in the Upper Galilee (Al Khalisa) and we were promised that all of our issues would be resolved [...] we were the first to sojourn for a year in this place and we realize that to this day none of the promises has been fulfilled.¹⁶

At some point, the migrants succeeded in bringing up the issue of their tumultuous relationship with Krol during a Knesset (Israeli Parliament) debate. Zecharia Gluska, head of the Yemenite faction at the Knesset, described Al Khalisa as a 'concentration camp', whereby 'Yemenite inhabitants go hungry for bread', because 'those who are in charge of Al Khalisa forcibly took from them their ration cards (to obtain food) and they are starving the settlers'.¹⁷

As time went by, with no improvement in sight, their disappointment with Krol became the main thrust of letters sent to the heads of state. In an epistle to the Prime Minister, the Yemenites complained about the dry bread that only arrives toward evening ('and the bread does not turn up till our faces turn pale'), the long queue at the grocery store and the attempts to impose on them a secular lifestyle (see below). At that point, they demanded that Krol be replaced by another person who would run the transit camp. They wrote to Ben Gurion:

We now plead to replace Eliezer Krol with a different director [...] who will spare us and our children, our widows and elders, because this director will not pity a weak man and find him a job, or a widow, and look into her rights, or for a job she can live on.¹⁸

The very fact that they dispatched letters speaks to the fact that the new residents, as founders of the northern town, felt that their voices and position should be heard; they also believed that the various state institutions would listen to them. In effect, within the coming month, a number of representatives from the Yemenite immigration department in Mapai arrived at the transit camp, but they failed to patch up the differences between Krol and the inhabitants. The

latter did not intend to give in and formulated a more emphatic letter to the institutions, which concluded with a threat to hold demonstrations:

If you do not take care of us soon before the holidays, because we have run out of patience [...] we will be forced to come to you with all our families and hold a hunger strike on the spot, and if you procure [a solution] without having to take these steps, then we will be grateful to you for life.¹⁹

The letter was signed by the local residents' committee, that is, by those who worked with Krol side-by-side and felt that they were not allotted any actual influential role over their own lives. The trust that these new immigrants had deposited in the Israeli establishment as being attentive and supportive, proved itself in this case. Already at the end of August, emergency meetings were held at the Histadrut and at Mapai's absorption department. Then, a decision was taken to overhaul the help given to the residents. Shlomo Zipman, one of the party activists who had volunteered for the newly-established organization – the Pioneering Service for Israel (Shahal) – was dispatched to Kiryat Shmona. Letters, interviews and memoirs reveal that Krol left the transit camp hastily and his diary ends abruptly, eight days after the emphatic letter set out above was delivered.²⁰ The Al Khalisa settlers had won their first battle to dethrone the transit-camp director, and their success reinforced their confidence in their ability to affect their fate in their new land.

A struggle for children's education and its outcome

Questions related to education, culture and identity were a focal point of tension during the period of the great immigration wave to Israel. In the immigrant camps, the transit camps and the immigrant settlements, there was a wide gap between the absorption mechanism, which sought, in the spirit of the 'melting pot' concept, to impart to the immigrant children a secular-Zionist Israeli identity, and many of the immigrants – mainly the Mizrahim (Middle Eastern Jews) – who wanted for their children a religious or traditional education that would conform to the set of values and beliefs of their families in their country of origin.

The recurring friction over this issue, which developed in the Khalsa transit camp – presented in the following – were not exceptional in their intensity in comparison to other places. However, whereas research hitherto focused mainly on the absorbing community and its internal battles on the issue of education for immigrant children,²¹ the case of the Yemenite immigrants of Kiryat Shmona sheds light on the rather determined and effective way whereby the immigrants themselves fought on the issue of their children's education.

The first school that was established in this northern settlement took into account the religious beliefs of the residents on the one hand and, on the other, the wishes of the veterans from the government and the regional kibbutzim – to bring their children closer to the Labor Movement. It belonged to the 'religious workers stream', that is, to the social-democratic labor federation, but within it, to the religious circles affiliated to Mapai.

Nevertheless, the immigrants felt that those in charge of their integration were trying, in different ways, to give their children a secular education, which they had no intention of agreeing to. Their resolve to resist the attempts to secularize their children was clearly expressed in the field of informal education. Youths from the neighboring kibbutz arrived in Kiryat Shmona and established a branch of the Hanoar Haoved Vehalomed movement (Federation of Young Students and Workers). In the course of time, the Yemenites felt that social activities in that club were held in a secular atmosphere, antagonistic to their worldview. They reacted vigorously and resolutely, as manifested in the report on the event in the Workers' Party newspaper which read: 'Threats and beating prevented the children from visiting and meeting the infidel children of Kfar Giladi [...] and the visits ceased'.²² The Socialist Workers Party newspaper attributed the Yemenites' resistance to the youth activity to incitement on the part of external elements: 'The wrath of God's earthly emissaries got hold of them [...] and sedition sprung against the

destroyers of the world and corrupters of the souls'. However, letters written by the local committee clearly resonate with their dissatisfaction at the attempts to sever their children's bonds with their heritage and identity. In one of the complaint letters about Krol addressed to the Prime Minister, they clarified:

He did not provide the kindergarten according to our will, but only sought to raise free Yemenite people, and that we will not tolerate or agree to. And we will not accept kitchen food except from the hands of a religious kindergarten teacher and a Yemenite teacher – only the Torah of the God of Life – we will accept no other.²³

The attempts to make the immigrant children hastily adopt a Zionist, socialist-secular identity erased, according to the Yemenite immigrants, the foundations of their identity, beliefs and worldview. Although the representatives of the kibbutzim were those who ran the transit camp, and despite the enthusiastic motivation of the volunteers, Khalsa's Yemenite settlers felt confident enough to decisively oppose that measure.

By early 1951, the school became the only one in the transit camp to belong to the religious workers' stream. Among its teachers there were also regional kibbutzim members who had enlisted to help in the transit camp, and the Yemenite immigrants from Kiryat Shmona were dissatisfied with the [insufficient] measure of the school's religiosity. Their sense of being besieged was also exacerbated by the arrival of representatives from different kibbutzim in an attempt to persuade them to send their children to be educated and live in a kibbutz.

Against this backdrop, the families intensified their pressure over the local committee which represented them, demanding that it convey the depth of their grievances, the gravity of the situation and their concerns that their sense of being pushed up against the wall of secular coercion might trigger a rebellion and lead to violent retaliation. One of the letters formulated by the committee and addressed to the Prime Minister poignantly expresses their feelings, and is presented here in full:

We deliver this message to you, your Excellency, from Kiryat Shmona (Al Khalisa), where we have lived for one and a half years and we have not been granted any respite, especially on account of our children, especially nowadays.

Everyone wants to abduct our children [from him] without our knowledge or consent, and we are considered, God forbid, like cattle to the slaughter. Especially us Yemenites – one comes at night from the Young Guard of Beit Zera and the other from the Federation of Young Students and Workers of Kfar Giladi. We didn't know where to run. If we turn west, there is Lebanon; if we turn East, there is Syria, and if we face southwards, there is the Sea of Galilee ... We were like a herd of cattle that had nowhere to run.

We must be granted the opportunity to live in Eretz Israel in a peaceful coexistence with our own brethren lest we come to face a danger of life between us and our veteran brethren in the country.²⁴

The letter aptly confirms the sense of persecution on the part of the immigrants who were sent to settle in the northern point, as well as their determination not to succumb to the pressure aimed at them from all quarters. Yet the transit-camp inhabitants and their self-elected committee did not settle for the poetic and inspiring expression of their voice and experiences and their 'right to shout'. The response from the prime minister's office was, indeed, laconic and disappointing,²⁵ but other sources point to the success of the battle waged by the Yemenites of Kiryat Shmona against their absorbing community.

Pnina Fitzer, a member of Kibbutz Shamir, worked as a teacher in Kiryat Shmona. In early 1951, she shared with her kibbutz friends the harsh reality of the transit camp and her experiences of working with the Yemenite immigrants. Her account once again reveals their determination and the activeness that characterized their conduct, as well as the influence that Kiryat Shmona's immigrant Yemenite community exercised on the reality of their lives. At first, Fitzer presented her equitable relationship with the parents of the Yemenite pupils: 'I am on good terms with the committee and talk to them about God'. But she also complained: 'They put

obstacles in the way of my work'. She described a bitter struggle that developed between educators and parents on the nature of the education received by the transit-camp children. According to her, the 'Yemenites Committee' – the parents' committee, launched two children's strikes at school during the term that had just passed:

They proved to the children that the teachers were hooligans and epicureans (infidels), and that the school and the army were institutions created with the purpose of helping the kidnapper kibbutzim. Out of concern for their children, they enriched their language with a novel curse – instead of 'go to hell' it became 'go to the kibbutz'.

Because of them, I am not allowed to explicitly tell about the kibbutz. I am not allowed to take the children here on trips. True, I do tell them at every opportunity about the kibbutz factories, but I must not imply that it would be good for them as well. Had I done that, I would have ended up without my job. The committee would take care of this and, perhaps, the school would also shut down. They would say: 'I am luring them to the kibbutz with the aid of the school'.²⁶

Her words speak to the immigrant parents' awareness of their strength, of their right not to capitulate to the wishes and conceptions of those responsible for their integration in the newly-formed state and town, and mainly, their success in deterring the educators who identified their pedagogic mission with the need to hastily transform the immigrant children into secular Israelis like themselves.

Fitzer regarded those immigrants through the prism of a 'modern' perspective: 'When they came to Israel, they boldly leaped over centuries of culture'. She explained to her kibbutz fellow members that '[i]t was not easy for them to come to terms with the new reality. In despair, they hold on to their customs and lifestyle and wish that these will endure throughout their children's lifetime'. Although she did not ignore the parents' decisive adherence to their culture and their willingness to fight for the Jewish identity of their children, she was convinced that the historical process was deterministic. Therefore, the parents would not be able to maintain their influence over the children who migrated with them: 'What power do they have against life itself? [...] clearly this is not possible, since the vibrant life in the country pours over them and washes off them detail after detail of the old'. The parents' sheer force of resistance took the kibbutz educator by surprise and she sought for an explanation to the phenomenon. To the best of her knowledge, the firmness of the parents' opposition stood in inverse relation to their chances of having the upper hand: 'It is also their secret recognition that they will end up in submission, and thus their fight for their lives like a candle before it dies out'. One of the parents protested that the children reached out to their educators for help, rather than to their parents, adding that this situation would lead the Yemenite immigrant children to alienate themselves from their parents. Fitzer concluded: 'It is true. They will be ours, and his heart grieves'.²⁷

Yet it seems that the power balance between the immigrants and the absorbers was less unequivocal than the assessment made by the educator from Kibbutz Shamir. The fact that she attested to her fear of speaking her mind before the students and familiarizing them with the lifestyle of the kibbutz points to the effectiveness of the Yemenite parents' resistance. They temporarily shut down the school and made it clear that they did not intend to accept being labeled as primitive people who did not know what was good for their children.

They articulated a sense of self-efficacy and did not gag their voices and resolution to determine the type of education that their children should receive. That source sheds light on the power dynamics in the absorption process in Israel, which was more balanced than portrayed in many studies and public discourse. The school's shutdown joins the almost violent halt of activity at the youth club, and a broader picture emerges than that outlined by Rozin in her significant research. Rozin emphasized the aspiration of the immigrants for acknowledgement and the importance of their having a say and the right to protest in the young Israeli arena, even if these were ineffective.²⁸ Here, in the case before us, the clear and explicit letters addressed to the state's leadership and to its various institutions demonstrate a persistent, stubborn battle based

upon their awareness of the right to object and the sense that the new immigrants were the 'landlords' in the settlements rather than helpless victims, but also their success in influencing their children's education and deterring those who acted – even in good faith – contrary to their interests and values. Throughout the following months, the Yemenite Committee issued a series of letters addressed to various governmentally supported educational institutions demanding the establishment of a school of the 'Mizrahi stream' in Kiryat Shmona, that is, a school with more pronounced religious characteristics that would better suit their heritage. The research literature has, hitherto, mainly rendered the battle for the immigrants' education as a chess game played between various political parties which represented the veterans' position, and engaged in 'soul hunting' among the immigrants, treating them as pawns in the old-timer hands, in order to introduce the immigrants' children into the educational stream affiliated to their party. The letters from Kiryat Shmona shed light on the active role played by the immigrants in this struggle and the clear voice they had in their demand for a religious education in the faraway town 'that would improve the situation of our children[;] otherwise we will not be able to see in our children our religious education'.²⁹

When it became clear that several dozen Yemenite families insisted on opening a new, more devout school in the area, affiliated to the religious parties, Mapai dispatched one of its more veteran activists among the Yemenites to assist them, with the backing of the regional council in charge of the transit camp, in order to persuade the parents to register their children in the religious Histadrut-affiliated religious school 'for the benefit of the children and for the benefit of their parents'.³⁰ It seemed that the action was quite forceful and productive, yet again the religious committee in Kiryat Shmona persevered in its struggle, marshalling the inspectors from the Ministry of Education and the Mizrahi stream, and succeeded in annulling the children's registration at the Histadrut school under the pretext that they had done so out of coercion and intimidation.³¹

The third successful struggle: willful departure and relocation

The determined activism exhibited by the group of Yemenite immigrants from Kiryat Shmona, as well as their ability to gear the assistance of the national support network, manifested in the two affairs described above, also characterizes the episode of their forsaking the area. From 1952 to 1953, an absolute majority of the families chose to leave the settlement and relocate in the central district of Israel. About 100 families were involved in setting up new rural settlements in the northern Sharon region. The first organized group to leave the northern transit camp consisted of a little more than ten families, who mainly originated from one village in Yemen. They set out in September of 1952 and established – alongside former immigrants from the ma'abarot and other work villagers – the settlement of Tnuvot. Shortly after the departure of the Tnuvot founders, 21 additional families registered in the transit camp in order to establish another moshav (an agricultural cooperative settlement).

Many other families deliberated for almost a year, until they decided to join the small group of settlement-founders. Eventually, in September of 1953, 82 families left to establish the moshav Sha'ar Efraim. What motivated their decision and how does the departure process contribute to the understanding of the power inherent in this group of immigrants? A central factor for their decision lay in their desire to reside in an agricultural settlement and make a living out of their own farms.

One may find an echo of the frustration experienced by the Kiryat Shmona settlers at being deprived of the lands they wished for: 'They have been in the area for eight months and they have not yet parceled the land', they complained in front of a reporter who visited the settlement, and hurled, 'All the lands are cultivated by the Galilee kibbutzim'.³²

Contrary to their expectations, the agricultural work offered to the Yemenite immigrants in Kiryat Shmona was concentrated, primarily as wage, often daily laborers, in the fields of others, which they cultivated instead of their own. Indeed, a journalist who visited Moshav Tnuvot two years after its establishment summarized the explanations of the settlers he had met for quitting Kiryat Shmona:

In Khalsa, since its planners turned it into a town, they were granted each a two-dunam piece of land, which sufficed only for the establishment of auxiliary farms, and the Yemenites revealed no interest in having only a tiny auxiliary farm.³³

The following is the message that came out of a press report by a journalist who met several residents from Sha'ar Efraim a few days after they settled:

The planners who decided to turn Khalsa into a town erred in their choice of the human stuff in order to achieve their goal [...] the part-time external jobs that were allotted to that group of Yemenites enabled them to sustain themselves but were not conducive to their taking root in the land. They demanded land – but this was not given to them.

One of them added: 'Finally Ben Gurion granted our wish [...] we are not for the city, and so we came here'.³⁴

Yet the desire to live in an agricultural settlement was not the only factor behind the group's choice to leave the settlement it had established. Dozens of families had worked in various crafts in Yemen and had no connection to agriculture. At the core of their decision also stood the hardships experienced in remote Kiryat Shmona and the sense that their influence upon the community in which they lived was but limited.

To these factors it is significant to add the attitude toward the Yemenite residents of Kiryat Shmona as a lazy and immature group of people – an attitude that did not disappear even after they succeeded in removing Krol from his post. The cautionary reminder that the Yemenites were not adequately suited to develop the new settlement featured in various newspaper reports, which seem to have expressed the accepted view among the veteran members of the region who were active in the transit camp.

In January of 1950, an article published in *Davar* read that 'The Yemenite community that was absorbed in Kiryat-Yosef requires great care. Their power of initiative and independence should be developed, and they should listen attentively to that which is new in our country'. A sharp dichotomy came to the fore in the desirable solution sought for the advancement of the new settlement and in the explanation for the urgent need to follow it through:

Immigrants from other ethnic backgrounds should be immediately added here, in order to make up for the willpower of the first settlers. The Yemenites are mentally prepared for work, but they have not yet become acquainted with the pace of the country and the present needs, and time is of the essence!³⁵

And again, four months elapsed and a report on Kiryat Shmona stated that 'The entire population is comprised of Yemenites. To their credit it should be noted that their adjustment to a life of work went well, but they lack the power of initiative'. The report also clarified that 'If a hundred families of other diasporas were to settle here, it would make great strides, because it rests at a crossroads'.³⁶

As new residents from other ethnic communities arrived in the town, the local Yemenite community lost its ascendancy. At that stage, their sense that they were disenfranchised from influential positions in the establishments created at the transit camp was exacerbated. Those institutions were directed by Mapai's emissaries who came from the central region; the vast majority were European Jews. Yisrael Yeshayahu, who visited Kiryat Shmona in early 1951, relayed to Mapai's leadership the complaints of the Yemenites from Kiryat Shmona that 'people from us [our community] are not introduced [as members] into the Histadrut and local institutions'.³⁷ A journalist who visited Sha'ar Efraim heard similar complaints from the very families that had left Kiryat Shmona: 'The Yemenite immigrants, the pioneers of the place, ended up as a

minority and found themselves cut off from the key positions in the area – the workers' council and the city administration'.³⁸ Despite the fact that it was them who built the settlement and constituted a large segment of its population, they did not assume an influential role in the establishments they created in the transit camp, and their frustration was exacerbated by the objective hurdles they faced in their daily lives in the outlying settlement. Even when experiencing misgivings prior to their departure, the Yemenite Kiryat Shmona settlers continued acting to improve their situation and to make their voices be clearly heard before state institutions and the activists from the 'department for Yemenite immigrants'. The messages conveyed in the various letters they sent interlace descriptions of the daily hardships in the area with their frustration from the lack of recognition of their founding group status.

One of those letters opened with the following words (after a polite greeting):

We, the Yemenite community, were dumped in Khalsa when it was a waste land and we suffered all the troubles there until we built the place/settlement in our strength and the sweat of our brow, and now we have not achieved the goodness of this place.³⁹

Another letter conveyed the message even in sharper tones: 'Our bad luck caused us to be thrown into this lousy place without proper arrangement or fair treatment, and we were cast out from all other Israeli citizens, and have encountered all the problems of this place ever since'.⁴⁰

They protested that as breadwinners of 'large families', many of them 'remain[ed] for several weeks without work or money, and ha[d] nothing to eat'. They complained about the decrepit school ceiling, about the lack of basic medical care, which caused them to spend money on trips to Tiberias and lost workdays, and reiterated their harsh feeling of those among the founders of the Yishuv: 'We have a right to the place and created it through our hard work and devotion'. Their complaints were many and wide-ranging, and also included a sense that the immigrants from Romania who came to Kiryat Shmona in their wake were better treated: they protested against the lack of goods, the long queues and the discrimination in favor of the Romanians at the grocery store. They also stressed elsewhere that the Romanians 'got shops and any easy work' and even that a suitable synagogue was built for the benefit of the European Jews, whereas the one allotted to the Yemenites was a long distance away from the residential neighborhood of many of them. The synagogue was the focal point of their letters. Since the Yemenite synagogue was located far from the residences of some community members, they demanded that another synagogue be erected at the northern part of the settlement.

Their success in deposing Krol, their first mentor, reinforced their conviction in their ability to determine their interaction with other functionaries at the transit camp. Their letters comprise acerbic complaints about Haim Roz, one of the Mapai activists who was dispatched to Kiryat Shmona, and who wielded influence in the area, within the framework of his activity at the workers' council – 'He plays the prosecutor *vis-à-vis* our every demand. We declare that we do not want him here'. Here dozens of signatories made a link between their sentiment *vis-à-vis* Kiryat Shmona, their hard feelings on account of Roz's attitude, and the possibility of their leaving the place: 'Because of him 50 families have already left, and the rest are at the ready'.

Their acknowledgement of the existence of a support and heedfulness/listening/attention network and the fact that they had not yet decided to leave the place was reflected at the end of the letter: 'Come quickly to our aid', alert 'all our representatives in the Histadrut and in all institutions'. And 'it is a pity for us that on account of our dire situation the wholeness of the newly-established settlement be harmed'.⁴¹

The prevailing academic and public discourse on the settlement process in the nascent State of Israel of immigrants in the 1950s is based upon a generalization that presents the immigrants as those who were sent, dispersed and allocated by the government and the Jewish Agency – as passive subjects sent out against their will. The case examined here of the Yemenite immigrants who left Kiryat Shmona contradicts such a generalization, and the dimension of free will and

choice prevails. The Agricultural Center, the absorption department of Mapai and the settlement movements did, indeed, seek to take the immigrants away from the immigration and transit camps into agricultural settlements, and accompanied every such act with a high degree of pathos.⁴² Yet the departure of families from the community of Kiryat Shmona is portrayed by the sources as a combined measure of immigrants and veterans. For instance, behind the scenes of the establishment of Tnuvot, an initiative was launched on the part of the Moshavim Movement and the veteran members of moshav Talmon-Geulim, who sought to expand it. Yet the departure from Kiryat Shmona and the creation of the new moshav was, not least, a result of the efforts by Rabbi Shimon Lidani, who travelled every week to Tel Aviv in search of a way to transplant his extensive family – already involved with agriculture in Yemen – into a suitable settlement. Lidani was assisted by David Maliach, a member of the Moshavim Movement, who headed a special department set up by the Jewish Agency with the goal of encouraging Yemenite immigrants to settle in rural areas. Shortly after settling on the ground, the new dwellers decided not to become annexed to the more veteran moshav (Talmon-Geulim), but rather become an independent moshav known as Tnuvot.⁴³ A similar process led to the establishment of Sha'ar Efraim by the 82 families from Kiryat Shmona.⁴⁴

The settlement of Sha'ar Efraim, on the eve of Rosh Hashana in 1953, featured in *Davar's* editorial as the last settlement to be erected on the ground in the outgoing year, and 'blessed with incoming settlers'. The article related to the 'organization of Kiryat Shmona's Yemenites' and congratulated their members on occasion of their settlement, although it was primarily devoted to praising those who had pulled the strings behind the scenes and trained the new immigrants for their resettlement.⁴⁵

It seems that, in practice, the immigrants' share in the initiative to establish a moshav and settle there was equivalent to that of the institutions. A reporter who visited Sha'ar Efraim immediately after its establishment noted:

Urgent delegations were issued to governmental and agency institutions, with the demand to settle wherever it is decided, even in the backcountry and even if homes were built for them in Khalsa. They expressed their willingness to replace them with tents and canvas huts on the condition that they be allotted their own land and be able to sustain themselves.⁴⁶

Rabbi Shimon Shaovi, the Yemenite Shochet (slaughterer) and inspector, chaired the committee that promoted the organized departure from Kiryat Shmona to Sha'ar Efraim. The initiative to leave was that of the group that had struggled, in its usual resolute way, to achieve its goal, and was also resourceful enough to resort to the nationwide support network that accompanied it. Moreover, within that network, there were those who preferred that the inhabitants continue living there and did not encourage them to relocate in the new settlement. The Department for Yemenite immigrants in Mapai did everything in its power to guarantee the conditions that would make the group remain in the northern settlement⁴⁷ and even Hezekiyahu Madhala, a member of the auxiliary farm department at the Histadrut Agricultural Center warned Sa'adiya Zaira, a senior member of the Yemenite committee in Kiryat Shmona, of the Yemenite families' constant contemplation of departure:

Of course we regret to learn that these people have not adapted to the place and, time and again, search for a pilgrim's staff and other places. When a settler does not set his sights in one place, he will never succeed in taking root. Man's redemption, therefore, will be found in his decision to enjoy his life in that very place and he will not move out. And they should not delude themselves that elsewhere there is no need to toil and labor and that there is plenty of work elsewhere. One can already read in the newspapers how difficult the situation is in the country due to unemployment.⁴⁸

Among the various establishments, there were, thus, activists who would rather have seen the group remain in Kiryat Shmona, but many families chose and acted to set up a new moshav. They channeled their efforts into that cause, even though it entailed a temporary decline in their standard of living – they left their homes in Kiryat Shmona for those in Sha'ar Efraim; in Tnuvot,

they initially lived in huts. Yet within these moshavim, they were the ones to shape the character of their lives.

The descriptions of the journalists who came to visit Sha'ar Efraim and Tnuvot in the years that followed the settlement stand out for the positive impression they express on the new settlements. The Yemenite immigrants felt, according to the reports, that they had reached their destination, as noted by a journalist who visited the site. One of the inhabitants of Tnuvot, Mazal, a 20-year-old mother of two, relates, 'Here, we carry [ourselves] [...] in the transit camp we were carried by others, which is why we didn't want to stay there'. The reporter added his impression to her account: 'The Yemenites from Tnuvot prefer to do things with their own hands and they do so without resentment, stubbornly and modestly'. Such was the case in Tnuvot, where its former Khalsa inhabitants represented only a minority of the moshav founders, as well as in Sha'ar Efraim, which was entirely a product of their own creation. The flood of complaint letters ceased and there is almost no evidence of a sense of deprivation, discrimination or struggle. The relocation to Sha'ar Efraim becomes manifest as a corrective to the settlement in Khalsa, a conscious and proactive rectification (Tikkun) effected by many dozens of families.

Since the establishment of Kiryat Shmona was not a wholehearted act of free choice, the immigrants' influence on the character of the yishuv and on its lifestyle was negligible, and its foundation did not bring about the subsequent acknowledgement of the Yemenite immigrants' contribution as its first settlers and builders. Four years later, with the creation of the new moshav in northern Sharon, that community was granted its own land. Its battles, activism and unwillingness to settle for a second-rate/secondary status as urban dwellers dependent upon the agricultural environment that surrounded them, led the group to an adequate place, granting them peace of mind. In contradistinction to their public image, manual and physical labor did not 'scare them off', certainly not from the moment they opted to become farmers in a new place, whereby they began to become integrated into the country from the start. That is how their stage of life in the transit camp of Kiryat Shmona constituted the consolidation and preparation phase of the Yemenite immigrants prior to their own establishment of the new moshav.

Conclusion

The lion's share of the 218 Yemenite immigrant families who founded Kiryat Shmona left the area between 1952 and 1953. The remaining families moved out in the following years, except for two (to date [2018], two women are still living there). A central feature revealed by the documents is the high level of communal organization, the ability to foster leadership and effectively mobilize action committees on various topics.

Their awareness that they deserved better attention and more favorable conditions in their integration process stands out, as well as their refusal to adapt and succumb to the intense pressure, exerted on them as parents, to give up their authority to shape the spiritual climate whereby their children were to be educated. Their consistent opposition to the various actions undertaken by the absorbing community demonstrates their resilience and understanding that it was their prerogative to organize and demand a change in the treatment received throughout the integration process.

Their dialogue with the authorities, their insistence on repeatedly recounting the events of the transit camp from their point of view, their will to protest against injustice and stand up for their rights, which culminated in their departure and resettlement all attest to their activism and initiative, which stands in striking contradiction to the passive, conformist and childish image inextricably interwoven with the Orientalist stereotype. It was a voice loud enough to be heard, a demand for attention and recognition; these strongholds were, moreover, accompanied by partial yet actual success in their struggle, which constituted, in effect, a cohesive factor for the group that guided them. Thus, they succeeded in replacing Eliezer Krol, the transit-camp director,

made teachers who taught at the camp take their power seriously wherever they expressed their worldview at school on matters of faith and religion, and, eventually, took active steps that enabled their organized departure from Kiryat Shmona in order to establish agricultural moshavim in the Sharon region.

What were the sources for the activism on the part of the Yemenite immigrants from Kiryat Shmona? It seems that, at some level, this was a perpetuation of the action patterns of rural Jews in Yemen, who held, under the Muslim legal system, constant negotiations with the authorities and engaged in a give-and-take interaction with their neighbors. The practice of writing letters to the heads of government was also customary in Yemen. The Yemenite Jews' determination and their acknowledgement of their power to influence the reality of their daily lives became evident also at the beginning of the immigration process, when they succeeded in removing from their posts some of the transit-point directors in Aden.⁴⁹ Their persistent activism may be regarded as a continuation of the lively activity carried out by the Yemenite immigrants during the Yishuv period prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, coming to the fore in their struggles over their status in the various moshavot and their attempts to navigate their way through the intricate politics of the Yishuv.⁵⁰

It appears that even the newly-formed Israeli democracy was a relatively open arena, which granted the immigrants an opportunity to take part in it by making their voices be heard and struggling for the right to shape their own lives. Another significant factor that contributed to the organization of the group of immigrants from Kiryat Shmona and promoted their struggle lies in the existence of a substantial support network based upon the veteran leadership among the Yemenite immigrants. Departments especially created in Mapai, the Histadrut and the Jewish Agency, accompanied and assisted the Yemenite immigrants in their integration and constituted a network of support and understanding. The activists in the departments who were already quite veteran in the country, acted as mediators *vis-à-vis* the central government and constituted a source of advice and counsel, undoubtedly for the local and religious committee established in Kiryat Shmona. The visits paid by the activists, the meetings and dialogues with them, afforded the new immigrants a deeper understanding of the Israeli reality, of the political and ideological struggles waged over their heads and of their possibilities to exercise pressure and actions.

The significance of this case study lies in the fact that it provides a complex perspective on the unfolding events that took place during the formative years of Israel and on the nature of the intricate and multifaceted encounter between veterans and immigrants in Israeli society. It was precisely this group, which was sent to the most remote point on the northern border, at the heart of an area characterized by a dominant and strong kibbutz settlement, that achieved several victories in its struggle, including real achievements in changing the conditions of their absorption and lives. Without arguing for equivalence in the power relations between absorbing communities and immigrants, or underestimating the hardships associated with the process of integration into the Israeli society, or even the injustices entailed, I argue that this case study demonstrates that a historical observation of the 1950s and of such encounters should be extricated from the attempt to adjust its participants into a one-dimensional and binary mold which distinguishes between the power and influence holders and the victims.

To what extent was the story of the Yemenite immigrants who founded Kiryat Shmona unique? How many similar stories may be found, or equivalent dimensions of activism and struggle among other groups that were absorbed in Israel during the 1950s? It seems that in the years to come there is room for expanding the research trend which seeks, by way of different case studies and comparative perspectives, to identify the variegated voices of the immigrants, the ways in which they interpreted their history, the mode of action they took, and their successes, albeit partial, in order to affect the process of their integration into Israeli society. Such studies will transcend one-dimensional and sweeping descriptions and contribute to the portrayal of a more complex, humanistic and reliable historical picture of the years of mass-immigration to Israel.

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