

## Rejuvenation

Whatever happened to the Zionist dream?

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# Where did the Zionist dream go?

• By AVRAHAM SHAMA

What happened to us Israelis? When did we become so disrespectful, intolerant and even hateful toward each other that one of us took the life of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995?

When did we become so dysfunctional that we needed four national elections just to put a coalition government together?

When did our Zionist dream crack?

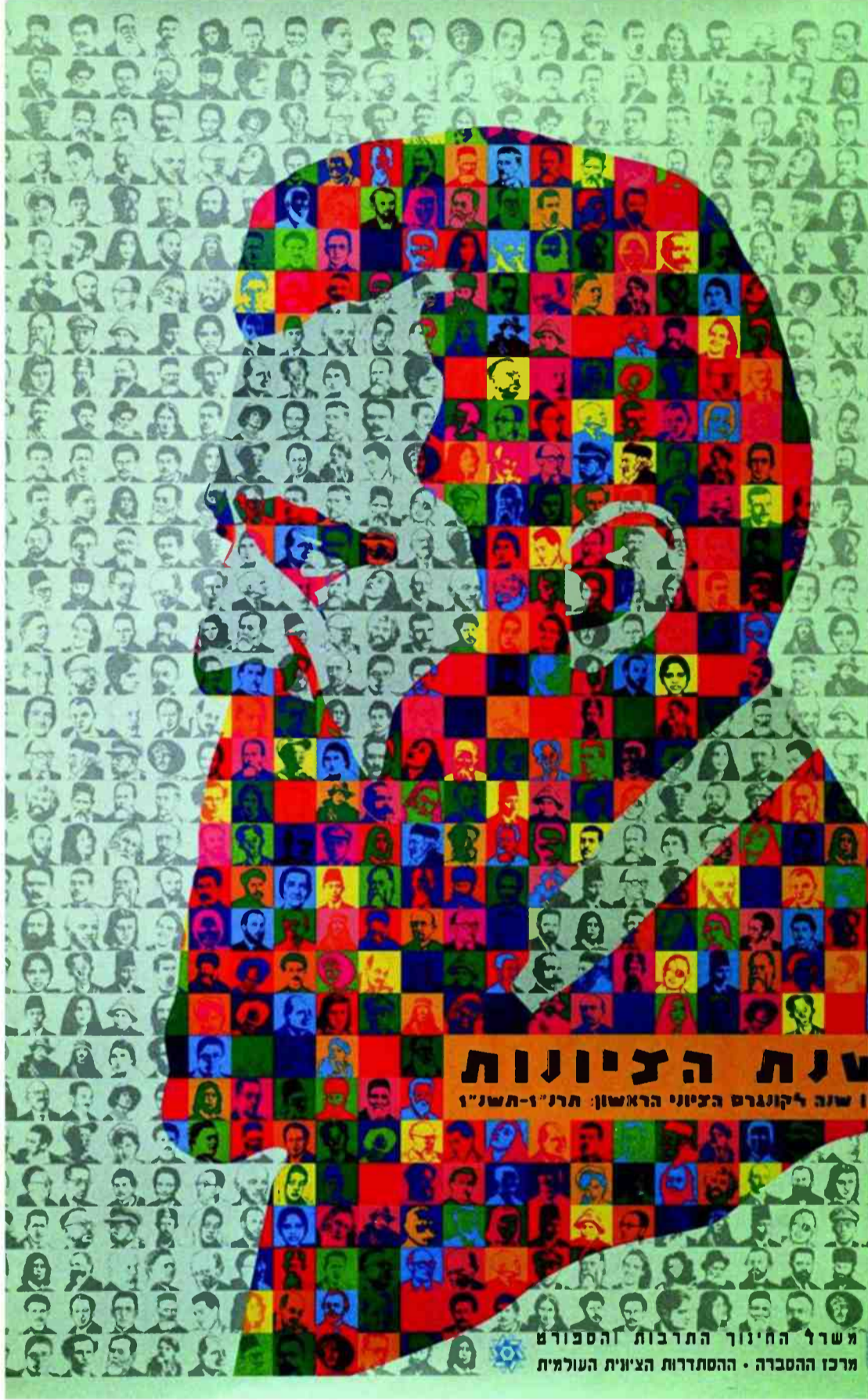
It wasn't always like this. I remember different, better times, when we were poor but content.

I remember the summer of 1954, when in the evenings after dusk, my family solved Israel's and the world's problems on the terrace of our new home in Kfar Saba. A sense of growth always hovered over the hot, dusty air that hung over the terrace, a comforting sense of building Israel, reclaiming its land, and of tomorrow being a better day. Those discussions would end when the breeze kicked in and the crickets began creaking, a signal for all of our family on the terrace to go to bed in the stuffy bedrooms, cramped with narrow refugee beds with thin mattresses.

Without radio or television, the terrace was the news center, the place to discuss everything. The adults talked about prime minister David Ben-Gurion, about settling more Jews in the Galilee, about the day's events, and about the opening of the first fast food shop in the center of the small village - a falafel stand, open in the afternoons only. They talked about things that happened during that day and about whatever came to their minds. The children became bored listening until their eyelids closed.

Earlier that summer my family had moved from our tent in the transition camp, Ma'abara, nearby Kfar Saba, to an older, humble house with real bedrooms, a bathroom and kitchen, a terrace, and a roof that did not leak. Not exactly a place of milk and honey, but a new house, even though it was second hand, with a street that had a name and a postal address, and new neighbors. Our house stood on the west side of the sandy, unpaved street - a short street with low, colorless one-story, tired, aging houses standing shyly on each side of it, dead-ending at an orange grove.

All our neighbors were East European Ashkenazi (white) Jews with small, quiet families. The men wore long khaki pants and short-sleeve khaki shirts from Ata - the best and only clothing store



A MOSAIC OF Herzl, representing Zionist imagery. We no longer hug perfect strangers on the street on Independence Day, or reflexively start dancing the hora every time the country achieves a milestone. (David Harel/Photoweb)

chain in socialist Israel then. The women, all homemakers, wore simple, colorful dresses. These were long-timer families, with few words and goals. We were curious about them, and I imagine they were about us, the black (they used "shvartze," a derogatory term for blacks in Yiddish) and very large Jewish Middle Eastern family from Iraq that had migrated to Israel only three years earlier, and did not speak Yiddish.

During the days, each of us had a purpose. My older sisters worked taking care

of children with Down syndrome, the four much younger children, including me, went to our new and alien school, my father looked for a job, and my mother took care of her eight children and of my father. But in the evening, after sundown, when everyone was back from work and done eating the zucchini dinner from the garden, we would make our way to the small front terrace, lit by a naked, low-voltage bulb, surrounded by moths dancing circles around it.

ON SOME EVENINGS, when the moon brightened the terrace with soothing silver light, we did not turn on the bulb because it was easier on the eyes and because it saved money. From the narrow and long garden between the terrace and the street, the roses emitted sweet perfume of honey and jasmine - dessert for the soul in those ration times.

In the afternoons, all children living on that street, including my two younger sisters and me, played on the deep sand of the unpaved

street - our big sandbox. This was our place, without cars or bikes, only pedestrians who would be returning from work later. We would play until dinnertime before congregating on the terrace, before discussing the day's events, before inhaling the sweet fragrance of the roses, before hearing the sound of the crickets heralding bedtime.

As usual, the adults talked about the events of the day, about the cotton yield in the Jezreel Valley, the newly developed breed of oranges, and about the political situation in the country and the Middle East - all through the pink lenses of satisfaction in building a nation that was reborn only six years earlier.

Now, when I look back at those days, at the terrace of our new Kfar Saba home, at the 10-year-old boy listening to those discussions, I yearn to go back there for a minute, one brief minute, to hear what happened that day, to feel us in the new neighborhood crowding the small terrace, to see everything in the positive light of those days turning Zionism into reality. I pray for that sense of growth and optimism, for the spirit binding us with each other and with the country, the spirit that gave life meaning, the spirit without which there was no life.

On my last visit to Kfar Saba, my legs carried me to our house on the sand street to see the old nest, to feel the hot, dusty air on the small terrace, to take in the sweet scent of those pink roses.

My home, like many others of the same vintage, was no longer there. In its place stood a muscular villa, with three floors, a swimming pool and an SUV, and a young boy riding a bicycle. The orange grove was gone and the street was paved and long, lined with shiny duplexes for as far as one could see.

But all I saw was my old home, with a terrace and a small garden, with the smell of roses, and all of us sitting in the terrace's short parapet discussing the events of the day, happy to see Israel being built.

Since then, the world had changed. I get this. We no longer hug perfect strangers on the street on Independence Day, or reflexively start dancing the hora every time the country achieves a milestone. But I believe that we can rekindle the essence and magic of our past, that we can be tolerant and respectful of each other, that we can share similar goals and a sense of optimism that tomorrow will be a better day, and that our Zionist dreams and aspirations can be rejuvenated.

Because I believe in Israel. The writer is a retired university professor and administrator.