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The price of return

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By Noah Efron Nov. 23, 2008 | 8:29 PM

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Khirbet Khizeh by S. Yizhar (translated by Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck) Ibis Editions, 131 pages, $16.95

First this: "They're just like animals," Yehuda explained to us, but we did not reply. The women were gathered onto another truck, and they began to scream and weep. We felt a mood of beggary, pus, and leprosy, and all that was lacking was the sound of dirges and charity saveth from death. "Ugh, revolting!" said Shlomo.

"Better they should die!" said Yehuda.

Something struck me like lightning. All at once everything seemed to mean something different, more precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile was like. This was what exile looked like.

Then this: We'd open a cooperative store, establish a school, maybe even a synagogue. There would be political parties here. They'd debate all sorts of things. They would plow fields, and sow, and reap, and do great things. Long live Hebrew Khizeh! Who, then, would ever have imagined that once there had been some Khirbet Khizeh that we emptied out and took for ourselves?

Finally this: My guts cried out. Colonizers, they shouted. Lies, my guts shouted. Khirbet Khizeh is not ours. The Spandau gun never gave us any rights. Oh, my guts screamed. What hadn't they told us about refugees. Everything, everything was for the refugees, their welfare, their rescue - our refugees, naturally. Those we were driving out - that was a totally different matter. Wait. Two thousand years of exile. The whole story. Jews being killed. Europe. We were masters now.

"Khirbet Khizeh," S. Yizhar's 1949 novella, now splendidly translated into English, follows a small unit of soldiers during Israel's War of Independence, as they patrol a mostly abandoned Palestinian village, herding onto trucks the old and sick who failed to flee before the troops arrived. The soldiers are bored and testy, resentful of the broken people they assemble at gunpoint and scornful of the meager homes they've been ordered to destroy. When the nameless narrator suffers pangs of conscience - "We have no right ... to kick them out of here!," he squeals - the others dismiss him as a bleeding-heart "saint." The story ends as night falls and the job is done: The trucks shudder into the distance and calm descends. The villagers are gone. Soon their terraced stone homes will be leveled, replaced by modernist concrete apartment blocks for refugee Jews from Europe and North Africa. As if the Arabs and their village had never been.

My own first encounter with "Khirbet Khizeh" came 25 years ago, at a seminar for immigrant kibbutznikim enlisting in the army. Israel had just conquered half of Lebanon, and Yizhar's story was offered as a lesson. The story's impact was complex and layered. The language itself, veined with references to the Bible, flattered my yeshiva Hebrew. While I could speak day-to-day Hebrew only haltingly, I immediately registered the tangled ganglia of allusions in "Khirbet Khizeh." Hebrew literature by its nature sutures ancient texts to modern ones, and in reading "Khirbet Khizeh," I felt the strength of the seam. For a kid like me, who had set down his Talmud not long before and would soon pick up a rifle in its place, the effect was electric.

"Khirbet Khizeh," in its language alone, linked my yeshiva past with my Israeli future. I was elated.

Palestinians in 'boxcars'

But at the same time, I was horrified. In the history I'd studied, Jews had implored Arabs to remain in their homes during the 1948 war, promising them safety right away and equal rights as citizens by and by. Those who left, did so because their leaders demanded it. At the same time, they promised that those who were uprooted would be well-compensated for their trouble after the war with seized Jewish lands. "Khirbet Khizeh" spoiled this smug account for me.

It wrecked my naive confidence that, after centuries of persecutions culminating in the Holocaust, Jews with guns, by their nature, complied with high standards of morality. Yizhar was not subtle about this point. In his story, the guns Jews aim at Palestinians are German Spandaus, and the transports onto which Jews load Palestinian are called "boxcars." The parallel Yizhar drew between Jews and Nazis was inescapable. Jews had ordered atrocities, and Jews had carried them out. I was appalled to realize this.

In short order, the horror I felt gave way to a peculiar pride.

If "Khirbet Khizeh" demonstrated that Israelis were not above exiling innocents, it also showed that we Israelis were not afraid to admit our crimes, either. We were told that beginning in 1964, the novella had been included in the list of canonical texts on the high school matriculation exam in literature. Not only, then, had one of Israel's most esteemed writers produced a work of searing self-criticism, but a generation of teens were also forced to read it before they themselves enlisted. Unconscionable acts had been committed, I concluded, but Israelis did not lack a conscience. Long live Yiddischer rectitude.

And so it was with a compound of elation, disgust and finally smug self-satisfaction that I first came to know "Khirbet Khizeh."

Now, a generation later, reading the English translation, many of the same feelings return, though they are still more complicated. Once again, horror is followed by an awed pride that so self-immolating a story could ever have been considered canonical, much less remain so for almost 60 years. But then comes a dull, dyspeptic realization that "Khirbet Khizeh," in English, in 2008, is a gift for anti-Israel propagandists. It will enter the growing bibliography of "ethnic cleansing" literature.

From now on, it will be Exhibit A in the case against Israel: positive proof that from the very start, like today, Israel has violently, sometimes murderously, displaced innocent Palestinians.

The book invites this. "Khirbet Khizeh" retains an immediacy that lends it straight-from-today's-front-page relevance. The exquisite afterword of the new edition says as much. It was written by David Shulman, a Hebrew University Sanskrit professor and peace activist.

"Unfortunately," Shulman writes, "it's not at all clear that young Israelis who read this tale of what is, for them, a very distant past are likely to connect it in any meaningful way to their lives today." For Shulman, the connection is immediate; he has been attending solidarity demonstrations in the West Bank villages of Twaneh and Tuba, which have recently come under vigilante attack by West Bank settlers. The next time he goes, he concludes, "we'll be carrying signs, in Hebrew and Arabic, for the benefit of the villagers and the soldiers and the press, signs that say something like, 'Lift the Siege on Tuba!' and 'Evacuate the Settler Outposts' and 'No to Occupation, Yes to Peace.' Maybe I'll make one for myself: 'No More Khirbet Khizehs.'"

Shulman is right to find in "Khirbet Khizeh" the message: "We did this; We do this." And he is not wrong to draw the moral: "No more Khirbet Khizehs." Perhaps this is what the novella means in 2008. Perhaps this is especially what the novella means when translated into English. Still, it could mean more, and it should.

Aware in 1949, oblivious in 1977

Fifty-nine years ago, when "Khirbet Khizeh" was first published, it was not an expose of wartime misconduct. No expose was needed. In 1949, few Israelis were unaware that Arab villages had been forcibly evacuated. As historian Anita Shapira has shown in a brilliant essay on the novella's reception from its publication until the 1990s, though "Khirbet Khizeh" was a best-seller in its first years, and though it was much discussed in newspapers and magazines, its veracity was hardly challenged and few questioned whether such an unpretty account of events should be published. When "Khirbet Khizeh" first came out, it was a rumination on something people knew to be true - how could they not? - and its aim was to clearly describe what had appeared vague in the fog of war and then the exaltation of victory: the moral muck inevitable in creating a Jewish majority in Palestine. This was the "Khirbet Khizeh" that was added to the high school curriculum.

In time, though, "Khirbet Khizeh" came to be seen in a completely different light. Early in 1977, director Ram Levi persuaded the Israel Broadcasting Authority to sponsor a made-for-television movie of the novella, and filming got underway by spring. During filming, on May 17, Menachem Begin's Likud came to power. When the film was supposed to air, in January 1978, the government postponed the broadcast; but when the new air date neared, the new education minister, Zevulun Hammer of the National Religious Party, cancelled the broadcast altogether. All hell broke loose. Opposing the ban on "Khirbet Khizeh," MK Yossi Sarid declared that "the flag of freedom of speech in Israel has been lowered to half-mast; it's going to take a lot to hoist it back up again."

Supporting the ban, journalist Tommy Lapid, who a quarter of century later would become justice minister, wrote that, "even if the Fatah Information Bureau were headed by a genius, he couldn't have come up with a better one than this. And even if Goebbels were directing Arab propaganda efforts, they couldn't have had greater success. And even if a fifth column were operating in our television studios, they couldn't have performed a better service to aid the enemies of our state."

In Lapid's scorched-earth prose, Yizhar was a Nazi propagandist. In Sarid's acerbic oratory, Hammer was a book-burner. Even among less incendiary pundits, "Khirbet Khizeh" had become a partisan matter. There were many reasons why this was so. For one thing, the story's 1978 television audience was different from what its readership had been. In 1949, Yizhar's readers had scraped through the 1948 war, absorbing the ample tragedy it produced for Jews (first and foremost) and for Arabs.

Twenty-nine years later, the great majority of Israelis had not experienced 1948; even among those who were alive during the war, most lived elsewhere while it raged, emigrating to Israel in the decades that followed.

These immigrants and their children (me among them) were acquainted with a more heroic vision of the birth of the state. For us, the erased Arab villages were an abstraction, if we knew of them at all. Noga Kadman, in her remarkable new book, "Erased from Space and Consciousness" (November Books, in Hebrew), maps hundreds of Arab villages emptied in 1948, traveling among the haunting wrecked remains of a home here, a mosque there, and documenting the obliviousness of Israelis today to the vanished communities.

A matter of context

For most of us today, in contrast to Yizhar's original readers, the 300-odd Khirbet Khizehs that ceased to exist en masse in 1948 are literally off the map. If they have any meaning at all, it is the symbolic meaning of an Agincourt or a Verdun. And, as is the fate of symbols, this one is sucked immediately into the polemical battles of the day. The "Khirbet Khizeh" of 1977 was a referendum on the repressiveness of the Begin government or the effete defeatism of the left. "Khirbet Khizeh" of 1982 was an object lesson about the Lebanon War.

"Khirbet Khizeh" of 2008 is about settlers harassing Palestinians in Tuba or, in the broader sweep of a review in the Economist, about Israel's "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestinians. Fair enough. In giving so vivid an account of young Israeli soldiers dispossessing an Arab village, Yizhar inevitably provided a schematic of Zionist injustice. But to read "Khirbet Khizeh" this way, and to use it this way, is to make of the book both too much and too little.

In a 1978 essay in Yedioth Ahronoth, Yizhar himself protested the treatment of his novella as an archetype:

"There's no duty or necessity whatsoever for a story about some specific events to have to symbolize something more general... And what you find in a given tale is not necessarily a model for everything that happened in the history of a people or a country at a particular time."

"Khirbet Khizeh" is about morality, among other things, but it is hardly a morality play. To draw from it sweeping conclusions about the galumphing overreach of Zionist power and the oppression of Arabs (in Israel, the occupied territories, Lebanon or wherever), is to miss something more fragile that the novella offers.

Leah Goldberg, writing in 1950, dismissed the notion that the heart of the story was the expulsion itself, which was after all "a part of reality that occurred, a product dictated by necessity."

The crux of the story was instead "the human tragedy it contains [which] casts a recurrent light of terror on the bare facts of our existence."

Amos Oz, writing in 1978, likewise saw the subject of "Khirbet Khizeh" not as a struggle between Jews and Arabs, but as a tortured struggle within the narrator between the demands of patriotism and the demands of human decency:

"S. Yizhar's story is not about the Jewish-Arab conflict. Here all the various frothers at the mouth have erred ... The subject of the story is not an Israel-Arab conflict but rather, doubly shaming, an Israel-Israel conflict. And more precisely: a conflict between one fighting fellow of ours and his split soul."

What Goldberg and Oz were getting at, is that this story that lends itself so smoothly to polemic (Ethnic cleansing! Traitorous! Proof of war crimes! Anti-Zionist propaganda!) is, at its heart, an inversion of polemic. This becomes more clear when read in the context of Yizhar's other fiction, important examples of which have recently been published as well in excellent English translation as "Preliminaries" and "Midnight Convoy & Other Stories" (both from Toby Press, 2007). In these books, as in "Khirbet Khizeh" and his other writing (especially his magnum opus, "Days of Ziklag," which remains to be translated), Yizhar described in poignant prose the ennui and ambivalence that have ever been part of Jewish settlement of Palestine. Where more prophetic types preached right and wrong, Yizhar was alive to the tragic jumble of rights and wrongs that do not lend themselves to easy sorting.

"Khirbet Khizeh" is large; it contains multitudes. It is a Nakbah story of dispossession. It is a story of the awesome price of Jewish national independence, paid by Jews and Arabs alike. It is a story of heartlessness and a story of conscience. It is a story of how one may be foreign to one's self, and at war with one's self. It is a story of memory courting amnesia. It was a story with no simple lesson, perhaps no lesson at all.

In 1949, although the war's dead were only freshly buried, Yizhar's many readers understood these things. Thirty years later, they were no longer clear; "Khirbet Khizeh" had become an occasion for finger-pointing. Today, now that "Khirbet Khizeh" has finally been published in English, one hopes that it will be greeted otherwise. At a time when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pronounces Zionism a stinking corpse, and when once-and-future-minister Avigdor Lieberman weighs the virtues of forcible transfer of Palestinians from their home, this is perhaps too much to expect.

It may be that we have lost our capacity for tragedy. And though it is too prettily precious an observation, this loss itself is heartbreaking. Ibis has given us a beautiful translation of Yizhar's tragic masterpiece. One can only hope that it is not consumed without remainder by the mean polemics that today too often stand in for moral reflection.

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