

The Gabriel Tirosh Affair 2

By Ariel Rubinstein

I've been wondering for years: Why did Yaakov Meir have us read Yitzhak Shalev's book?

1. We were teenagers in a divided Jerusalem, sabras who were born soon after the birth of the state. Some of our parents fought in the War of the Independence and others, immigrants from Europe, were too old to fight. The title “prestigious” had not yet been attached to the Hebrew University High School (“Leyada”). Most of the students were members of youth movements – not so much for the ideals as to brandish the wings of Israeliness. We argued about the source of our right to the land, the negation of the Diaspora and the Jewish people’s resilience in the Holocaust, while confronting the eternal issues of adolescence.

During the first year, the school was housed in the Umriya building. We played among the olive trees, unaware that 15 years earlier other children had climbed on them – children who had become refugee neighbors. I lived in northern Jerusalem and from the roof of my home, between the water tanks, we could see Mount Scopus, the trees of French Hill and the village of Shuafat.

2. Yaakov Meir landed in our world when we were at the beginning of 8th grade. He was the teacher of what we called “Halacha” in our school – not a favorite subject among the children, most of whom did not even enter a synagogue on Yom Kippur. It is the fate of fallen soldiers to be the object of praise they never heard during their lifetime. But contrary to this norm, Yaakov Meir was revered prior to his death – in a divided and insular Jerusalem, no less so than after his death – in a connected and ecstatic Jerusalem.

A pedagogic poem: How did the unusual teacher, who wore a kippa, become the most well-liked teacher? A lesson conducted by Yaakov Meir would hinge on a line of text and develop into a lively discussion about anything we found of interest. The expression – “we have to cover the material” – was inconceivable. A common sight in the corridors: a stream of children surrounding Yaakov Meir, a heated discussion raging about a subject that came up during the lesson.

Yaakov Meir’s way of thinking exuded rationalism. Halacha studies with him were no less analytical than mathematics classes. Informed parents leaked the information that he was a student at Hebrew University and was teaching us, secular students, out of a sense of mission. There were rumors that he was very popular with his fellow university students, including the illustrious army man who ultimately arranged his induction into the fighting ranks.

One winter, Yaakov Meir invited us to his home for a “philosophy club.” We spent long evenings studying Aristotle. The memory is blurred and I do not even recall the book we used. I just remember that one time a shy woman peeked into the small and crowded room, and I said to myself that her gentleness was so apt for him, Yaakov Meir. Today it is clear to me that his power over us derived not only from his intellectual acuity, but also from his manly character, from the roars of

encouragement he sounded as we climbed up a Galilean hill during our annual class trip, from the dilapidated Lambretta scooter he rode, from his warm voice and from the mischievous and loving smile he imparted upon us.

3. Yaakov Meir was also unusual in our school in another way. He often spoke with us about political affairs, and it never occurred to us to demand that he refrain from mixing politics with education. It is not surprising that a teacher from “the world of sages” would repeatedly note the problematic nature of a secular Jewish nationalism devoid of religious content. In time, it became clear that Yaakov Meir held political views that today would be categorized as “extreme right.” It is true that all of us were eager for battle and none of us doubted the justice of our path and the IDF’s purity of arms. But among the students, most of whom came from Mapai-leaning homes, one would not expect to discover fondness for a person who espoused views more extreme than those of the despised Herut party. Nonetheless, we listened to Yaakov Meir even when he insisted on our right to all of the land and spoke about our obligation to realize the vision and longed for the conquest of the Old City.

4. When he appeared in my life, I already held very nationalistic views. On Saturdays, I would roam along the border and ascend the lookout point on Mount Zion, stretching myself taller in order to see the top section of the Western Wall. I took note of every border incident, hoping it would develop into a major war that would breach the wall that made it impossible to reach the gates of the Old City from Jaffa Street. The song “Anonymous Soldiers” moved me. I wanted to join an underground movement that would lead to the conquest of the Old City. On Friday nights, I would pray in the *stieblach* of Mea She’arim and in the alleyways I would sometimes whisper the password of Lehi members, hoping that the underground, which I imagined still operating in hidden corners of the neighborhood, would take me under its wings. With my pocket money, I bought a journal named *Eretz Yisrael*, which was the mouthpiece of the religious veterans of Lehi. On its cover was a map of the real Greater Land of Israel, from the Euphrates to the Nile.

Another publication I subscribed to was *Hehazit* [The Front], a journal of the “nationalist circles,” which was distributed free of charge, with the request to pass it on to others. The editor of the publication, Yisrael Eldad, one of the leaders of Lehi, a publicist and teacher of humanities, fascinated me as an amazing speaker. The cover page quotes [Lehi leader] Yair: “The kingdom of the house of David will be established in blood.” On the back page of this lean journal: the main points of Yair’s *Hatehiya* [The Revival], concluding with: “Building the Third Temple as a sign of the era of complete redemption.” It will become apparent that I need to also note that the staff of *Hehazit* maintained underground codes and made sure to print all articles without the author’s name.

5. And now I come to the incident that occurred in our school about a year before Yaakov Meir’s departure. On Fridays, the school would hold an “assembly” for its students featuring a lecture aimed at enriching us in matters of science, culture and current events. During that year, Yaakov Meir was in charge of inviting lecturers and leading the assembly. And so, in a most unusual way, we were required to read an entire book prior to the appearance of its author, Yitzhak Shalev.

The book was “The Gabriel Tirosh Affair,” which was published by Am Oved in 1965. Gabriel Tirosh, a history teacher at the Jerusalem Gymnasium, fascinates his students when teaching the history of the Crusaders in the Land of Israel, and more than hints about the necessary historical conclusions: We will vanish from the region unless we instill the fear of us in the sons of Ishmael. Even before the events of 1936, he brings a select group of his students to his home, trains them to use weapons and prepares them mentally to use them. When the events occur, “the select few” violates the *yishuv*’s directive to maintain restraint. They conduct a successful ambush in the Valley of the Cross and a more or less targeted liquidation in Lifta. And then a mishap occurs near the Sanhedrin tombs: The student Aya was killed and Gabriel Tirosh grieves and disappears, forever.

It was the first book I read that dealt with my childhood environment and its secret longings. The Sanhedrin garden was a magical garden. According to a neighborhood legend, there is a tunnel leading from one of the caves directly into the Old City. The book’s plot centers on Gabriel Tirosh’s home in the Beit Yisrael neighborhood on the outskirts of the Bukharin neighborhood, a few houses from mine. Even my neighborhood, Tel Arza, was mentioned in the book, along with the streams descending from it toward Beit Iksha and Shuafat. The book also had a contemporary message: Those were the first days of activity of the Fatah organization, which planted bombs here and there in outlying towns. And one Friday night, Fatah operatives from Beit Iksha came up and planted a bomb under a residential building in the lower Romema neighborhood (Lifta), which led Levi Eshkol to respond: “The notebook is open and the hand is taking note.”

When the book was published, it aroused strong controversy because the hero was a bitter enemy of the establishment of which Am Oved Publishing company was a part. In *Davar*, Yehuda Slotzky, one of the editors of “The History of the Haganah,” complained: “The story is a complete fabrication.” In the Revisionist magazine *Haumah* [The Nation], someone named Eliyahu Nur responded to him: “Even if the author forgot the facts, or did not know them, or changed some of them ... it is definitely clear that while the author is talking about the past, his words – whether intentionally or not – reflect upon the present.”

I have wondered for years: Why did Yaakov Meir have us read the book? Now I know that no less than the book dealt with the past and was relevant for the present, it spoke about the future. But I am also getting ahead of myself.

6. In 11th grade, something happened between Yaakov Meir and me. I stopped studying with him and he was no longer so friendly to me. During recess, I would see him roaming around the school courtyard with Sarah, a girl who studied in the humanities track and was exceptionally stellar in philosophy and Judaic studies. I could only look at Sarah with envy. I imagined that behind the cover of the philosophy conversation the two were planning, without me, to establish the underground to liberate Jerusalem.

About a week before Nasser closed the Straits of Tiran, something happened that ostensibly pertained to my relationship with Yaakov Meir’s clear opponent, the Bible teacher Shimon Bar Efrat. Both teachers were Holocaust refugees. Yaakov Meir was born in Belgium and escaped via France to Switzerland. Shimon Bar Efrat survived in

hiding in Holland. But while Yaakov Meir was muscular, dressed like a working man and had an Israeli appearance, the Bible teacher was lean and small. He sometimes came to class with a tie and his language was entirely European. Moreover, Bar Efrat was known for his pacifist views, which made him the subject of scorn and ridicule in our eyes.

Some of us, including me, went to great lengths to provoke Mr. Bar Efrat. On the top of the Bible test held immediately after Passover vacation, I wrote: "Day of Redemption, and if, heaven forbid, it does not arrive, the 364th day of the 19th year since the Old City fell." I made sure that Bar Efrat would notice what was written and he, boiling with rage, ordered me to write the exam on another page. This, of course, served as a suitable excuse to write to the principal of the school a well-reasoned letter of protest against "the silencing of expression that is practiced in our school."

But the school administration sided with the Bible teacher and during the days of waiting, I was compelled to go to his home and apologize. And I wanted Yaakov Meir's support so much, and I did not receive it.

7. The news of Yaakov Meir's death in the battle for French Hill, on the way from the Shuafat village, reached us during the afternoon of the first day we returned to studies following the vacation the war had imposed on us. One girl burst into tears. I received the news with relative indifference. Perhaps I was even proud that now I too knew someone who had fallen in war. I thought it was fitting that if someone had to fall in battle for the liberation of Jerusalem it should be someone who believed so wholeheartedly in its unification. I pondered the fact that, like Moses, Yaakov Meir looked upon Jerusalem but did not enter its gates. I knew that Yaakov Meir left behind a wife and two children, but the fashion of the hour was to take delight in clumps of ancestral earth and savor our historical victory, rather than take an interest in the fate of orphans.

8. We grew older. I believe that Yaakov Meir's image was engraved in the formative personal memory of each one of us, even if it only arose when we took time for nostalgia. We changed. One of us hung a mobile of "Metzupim"[candy bars sold at IDF canteens] over the crib of his infant son to designate the non-combat role he planned for him when he reaches the age of conscription. My good friend Yuval, who pushed us to enlist in combat units, approached Shimon Bar Efrat recently and expressed his appreciation for the fact that he had the courage to stand exposed by his lectern in front of our militant bunch, with his dovish views. My heart still skips a beat when I stroll through Mea She'arim and the Old City. But I'm now sick and tired of the occupation and support erasing everything that war cast upon us. I even support dividing Jerusalem.

9. I was abroad last Memorial Day, far from Tel Arza, from the lookout point on Mount Zion and even from the cafés of Tel Aviv. I was struck by longings and sensing the sadness of Israel when an e-mail message appeared on my screen from someone I did not know, Moshe Meir. "I think that my father Yaakov Meir was your teacher," he wrote to me. When we met a week later in a Jerusalem café, Moshe Meir did not have to introduce himself: the same beard stubble, kippa, look and smile his father had. But he was already 13 years older than his father was when he died. Before the meeting, I heard that he and his sister Hani, just like their father, cling to

our sources as the fountain of life, and that people talk about them. He became a Jerusalem educator who chastises religious people in his writings for scorning secularity. He heroically assists terminally ill patients through the study of texts.

Moshe Meir told me the story he is presenting today [May 2] to readers of Haaretz in his article “My Father, My Father.” He ventured into the vacuum his father left, since Yaakov Meir devoted himself to the spoken word and did not leave writing behind. Moshe told me how he came to learn about the very likely possibility that his father was injured by “friendly fire” and abandoned in the field, and that it is possible that he “justified his fate” before his death. I was afraid that he would pull out the last note found in his father’s wallet. He showed me sloppy military documents that summarized the course of the battle, and I was shocked by the disorderly way in which the case of Yaakov Meir’s death was handled.

He asked about his father. I thought that everything I was telling him was redundant, but he looked at me with such amazement that I found myself asking him, “Tell me, you don’t realize that your father was a great man?”

10. For years, I had forgotten the content of the book “The Gabriel Tirosh Affair.” Now, prior to writing this article, I rushed out to buy it again. The book has been reprinted with its original cover, which helped draw me back to the time when I first read it.

I consider myself a very rational person, explaining every coincidence with statistical tools and refusing to recognize the existence of “the hand of fate.” These traits did not help me when I started to read “The Gabriel Tirosh Affair.” Already on the first page of the book, the narrator tells about his teacher, Gabriel Tirosh, and the year, we recall, is 1965: “We knew that he was involved in the attack on the village of Shuafat... but what his fate was afterwards, we don’t know – even after the reports we painstakingly collected.”

I will not weary the reader with all of the details that are amazingly similar between the story of Gabriel Tirosh and that of Yaakov Meir. Many of them Yaakov Meir could have noted himself when he asked us to read the book. “Look, all of the land is ours,” Gabriel Tirosh says to his students and dispatches them to study history through the unconventional method of “independent work and study.” Here he is leading his students up a hill on a hike in the Galilee. And who was the opponent of Gabriel Tirosh if not the Bible teacher “Karta-Hadta”, who “entrenched himself in Isaiah’s notions of ‘everlasting peace.’” But one similarity surely escaped Yaakov Meir, and that was the narrator’s jealousy of the young student Aya; the narrator imagines that a sort of tender love flows between her and Gabriel Tirosh.

11. The narrator in The Gabriel Tirosh Affair stole the words from me: “Sometimes after an action or decision in everyday life, I ask myself what Gabriel would say about it.” During the 39 years since he disappeared, I have met quite a few impressive people, but the only one I would like to hear telling me what he would say now is Yaakov Meir.

I would start the conversation with him by wondering why he wanted us to read a book that employs such a blatant stereotype of the Arab villain, devoid of humanity,

dedicated to hatred and murdering Jews. I would continue and attack Yaakov Meir: How could you, a child whose father was sent to Auschwitz, join up with people who call for “solving the problem of foreigners through a population exchange” and who immediately after your death would say, “Palestine never was and never will be. Only Israel lives and exists.” I would enlist the criterion of intellectual consistency and demand an explanation about how someone who identifies so much with “we were slaves [in Egypt]” and makes the concrete demand for “the completion of our redemption” without paying a bit of attention to the slaves who will pay the price of the redemption.

Some of my friends think that if Yaakov Meir were alive today, he would not affiliate with the extreme right-wing camp. It is difficult for us to reconcile the love of man, passion for life and intellectual acuity with those who joyfully dispossess and ecstatically clutch onto the corners of Joseph’s Tomb. I would like to believe that Yaakov Meir would now distance himself from the ideas that led us – and even more so, led him – to where we are now. But I feel compelled to refrain from putting words in the mouth of the dead. I am only certain that he would have conducted a spirited conversation with me – making wonderful arguments, and addressing my complaints against him, which of course are also complaints against myself – with respect, seriousness and a smile.

12. I poked around the boxes in which I placed the few written mementos of my childhood. In one of them, I had buried editions of the *Hehazit* journal. I immediately noticed the edition from July 1967, the first one published after the war. Its headline is horrifying: “The solution for the Arab problem: their departure to their countries.” At the bottom of the page, in a thin black frame, is a column with 12 rows starting with the words: “Among those fallen in the liberation of Jerusalem was our active colleague Yaakov Meir.” The columnist continues: “His last article was published in *Hehazit* for the Passover holiday.” And here *Hehazit* makes an exception to the principle of not identifying the authors of articles and reveals the title of the last article Yaakov Meir wrote prior to his death, an article that his son did not even know existed: “And if your son asks you.”