A black and white photograph of several Israeli paratroopers in a mountainous, rocky landscape. The soldiers are wearing helmets and gear, looking upwards with serious expressions. The background shows steep, rocky terrain under a bright sky.

LIKE DREAMERS

THE STORY OF THE ISRAELI PARATROOPERS
WHO REUNITED JERUSALEM AND DIVIDED A NATION

YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

AUTHOR OF *AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE GARDEN OF EDEN*

LIKE DREAMERS

THE STORY OF THE ISRAELI
PARATROOPERS WHO REUNITED
JERUSALEM AND DIVIDED A NATION

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Dedication

*For Moriah, Gavriel, and Shachar—
the next chapter is yours.*

Epigraph

A SONG OF ASCENTS

When the Lord returned the exiles of Zion,
we were like dreamers.
Then our mouths filled with laughter,
And our tongues with songs of joy.
Then they said among the nations:
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
The Lord has done great things for us.

—Psalm 126

We are writing the next chapter of the Bible.

—Hanan Porat, June 7, 1967

Sky-diving without a parachute,
Open to all directions,
And the longing for each direction
Is destroying me.

—Meir Ariel, “The Snake’s Shed Skin,” 1988

Contents

Dedication

Epigraph

Who's Who

Introduction: June 6, 1967

PART ONE: THE LIONS' GATE (MAY–JUNE 1967)

Chapter 1: May Day

Chapter 2: The Center

Chapter 3: Born to Serve

Chapter 4: A Time of Waiting

Chapter 5: No-Man's-Land

Chapter 6: "The Temple Mount Is in Our Hands"

Chapter 7: "Jerusalem of Iron"

PART TWO: THE SEVENTH DAY (1967–1973)

Chapter 8: The Summer of Mercaz

Chapter 9: The Kibbutzniks Come Home

Chapter 10: The Children Return to Their Borders

Chapter 11: Attrition

Chapter 12: The Invention of Yisrael Harel

Chapter 13: Utopias Lost and Found

Chapter 14: Across The Border

PART THREE: ATONEMENT (1973–1982)

Chapter 15: Brave-Hearted Men

Chapter 16: "Our Forces Passed a Quiet Night in Suez"

Chapter 17: The Home Front

Photo Insert

Chapter 18: "End of the Orange Season"

Chapter 19: A New Israel
Chapter 20: Building Different Israels
Chapter 21: *Hurban*

PART FOUR: MIDDLE AGE (1982–1992)

Chapter 22: The Forty-First Kilometer
Chapter 23: Civil Wars
Chapter 24: Idolatrous Fire
Chapter 25: New Beginnings
Chapter 26: Under Siege

PART FIVE: END OF THE SIX-DAY WAR (1992–2004)

Chapter 27: A New Israel, Again
Chapter 28: Almost Normal
Chapter 29: Careening Toward the Center

Acknowledgments

Notes

Bibliography

Index

About the Author

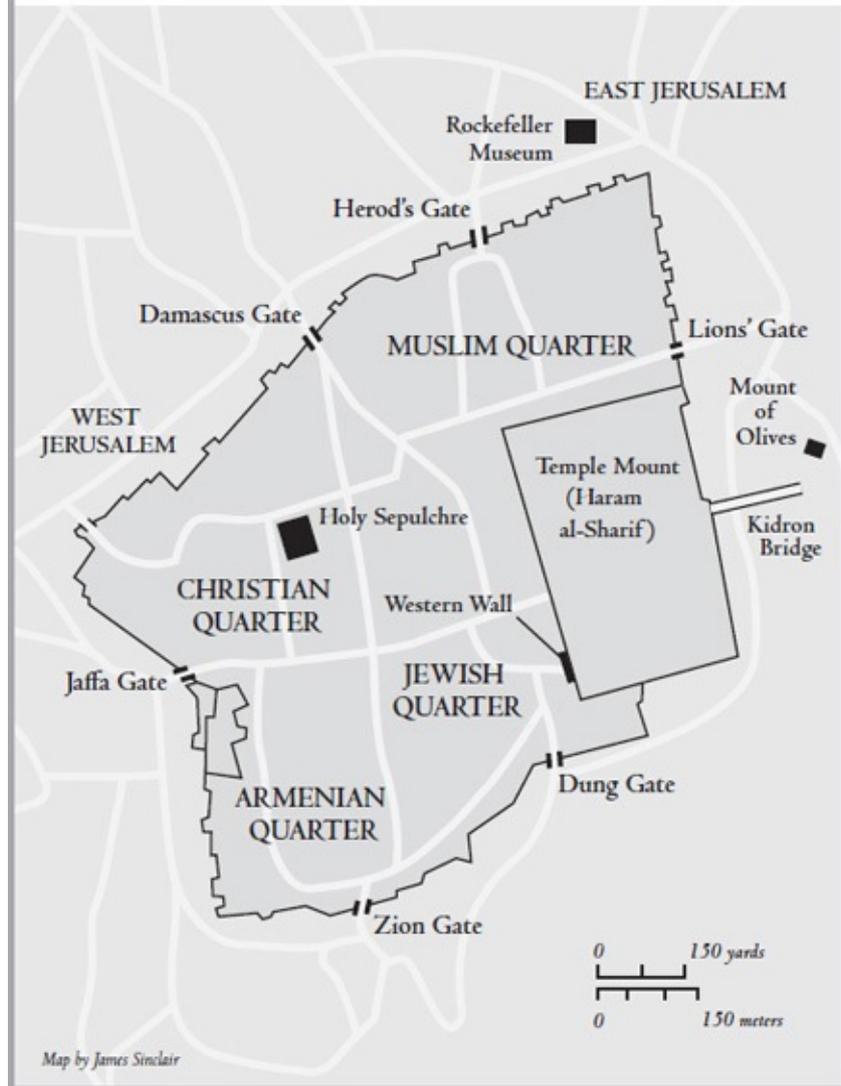
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THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM



Who's Who

THE KIBBUTZNIK PARATROOPERS

ARIK ACHMON Born on Kibbutz Givat Brenner and moved to Kibbutz Netzer Sereni after the split over Stalinism. Served as the 55th Brigade's chief intelligence officer in the Six-Day War and helped lead the crossing of the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur War. Went on to help establish Israel's domestic aviation industry and shift the statist economy toward capitalism.

UDI ADIV Born on Kibbutz Gan Shmuel. In 1972 traveled to Damascus to help create an anti-Zionist terrorist underground. Served twelve years in an Israeli prison.

MEIR ARIEL The greatest Hebrew poet-singer of his generation. First came to public attention after the Six-Day War, with his song "Jerusalem of Iron." Member Kibbutz Mishmarot. Died in 1999.

AVITAL GEVA Born on Kibbutz Ein Shemer. Wounded in the battle for Jerusalem, went on to become a leading conceptual artist. In 1977 founded an educational greenhouse to teach young people ecological principles and kibbutz values. Represented the state of Israel in the 1993 Venice Biennale. Active in the antioccupation movement Peace Now.

THE RELIGIOUS ZIONIST PARATROOPERS

YOEL BIN-NUN A founder of the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) settlement movement. Led a generation of religious Zionists to study the Bible as a way of understanding contemporary Israel. Broke with the settlement movement following the assassination of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. A founder of the settlements of Alon Shvut and Ofra.

YISRAEL HAREL (FORMERLY HASENFRATZ) A child survivor of the Holocaust, and a leader in the Bnei Akiva religious Zionist youth movement. Founded the West Bank settlements' umbrella organization, the Yesha Council, and its magazine, *Nekudah*, and served for many years as settler spokesman. A veteran settler in Ofra.

HANAN PORAT Founder of the first West Bank settlement, Kfar Etzion. Wounded in the Yom Kippur War, then helped found Gush Emunim. First settler elected to the Israeli parliament. Died in 2011.

FAMILY MEMBERS

YEHUDIT ACHMON Psychologist, married to Arik Achmon. Grew up on Kibbutz

Mishmar Ha'Emek. Daughter of Yaakov Hazan, leader of the socialist Zionist movement Hashomer Hatzair.

TOVA AND URI ADIV Udi's parents. Led campaign for his release from prison.

TIRZA ARIEL Businesswoman, married to Meir Ariel. Grew up on Kibbutz Kfar Szold, moved to Kibbutz Mishmarot after marrying Meir.

ESTHER BIN-NUN Dietitian, married to Yoel Bin-Nun. A member of the Ofra settlement before leaving with Yoel after the Rabin assassination.

ADA GEVA Bible teacher and high school principal, married to Avital Geva. Member of Kibbutz Ein Shemer. Daughter of Ein Shemer's fallen hero, Anatole Shtarkman.

KUBA GEVA Avital's father. Kibbutz Ein Shemer's architect.

SARAH HAREL Social worker, married to Yisrael Harel. Grew up in an ultra-Orthodox family. Member of the Ofra settlement. Died in 2006.

SYLVIA KLINGBERG Far-left Matzpen activist, Udi Adiv's first wife. Daughter of Soviet spy Marcus Klingberg.

LEAH LESHEM Led campaign to free Udi Adiv. Married Udi when he was released from prison.

OTHER PARATROOPERS

YISRAEL ARIEL (FORMERLY SHTIGLITZ) Rabbi of the Sinai settlement of Yamit, helped lead the struggle to prevent Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Desert in 1982.

EMIL GRUENSWEIG Peace Now activist killed by a grenade in an attack on a demonstration against Ariel Sharon in 1983.

MOTTA GUR Commander of the 55th Brigade in the battle for Jerusalem, later chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Died in 1995.

AMNON HARODI Member of Kibbutz Ein Shemer, killed in the battle for Jerusalem.

YOSEF "YOSKE BALAGAN" SCHWARTZ Arik Achmon's ex-brother-in-law and paratrooper jester.

MOSHE "MOISHELEH" STEMPEL-PELES Deputy commander of the 55th Brigade in June 1967. Killed in action in 1968.

OTHER RELIGIOUS ZIONISTS

YEHUDAH AMITAL Rabbi of the Mount Etzion yeshiva. A Holocaust survivor and leading opponent of religious extremism.

AVINOAM "ABU" AMICHAI A founder of Kfar Etzion; killed in the Yom Kippur War.

SANDY AMICHAI Kfar Etzion's first American; married Avinoam "Abu" Amichai.

YEHUDAH ETZION Student and study partner of Yoel Bin-Nun. Imprisoned for leading a plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount.

SHLOMO GOREN Longtime chief rabbi of the IDF. Became chief rabbi of Israel in 1973.

ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK First chief rabbi of the pre-state Jewish community in the land of Israel. One of the great Jewish mystics and thinkers of the modern era. Died in 1935.

ZVI YEHUDAH KOOK Son of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, rabbinic head of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva and spiritual father of the Gush Emunim settlement movement. Died in 1982.

MOSHE LEVINGER Founder of the Jewish community in the West Bank city of Hebron, and of the adjacent Jewish town, Kiryat Arba. Helped found the Gush Emunim settlement movement.

OTHERS

MOTTI ASHKENAZI Commanded the only Israeli outpost along the Suez Canal that didn't fall to the Egyptians during the Yom Kippur War. Initiated the protest movement that toppled the government of prime minister Golda Meir in 1974.

SHALOM HANOCH A founding father of Israeli rock music. Grew up on Kibbutz Mishmarot. Childhood friend of Meir Ariel.

URI ILAN Israeli soldier from Kibbutz Gan Shmuel who committed suicide in a Syrian prison.

ENZO SERENI Italian-born Zionist pioneer, a founder of Kibbutz Givat Brenner. Killed on a parachuting mission to Nazi-occupied Europe. Kibbutz Netzer Sereni is named in his memory.

DAOUD TURKI Arab Israeli leader of an anti-Israel terrorist underground. Charged with treason along with Udi Adiv and sentenced to seventeen years.

Introduction: June 6, 1967

THE LONG LINES of silent young men moved single-file through the blacked-out streets, illumined only by flashes exploding in the approaching distance. Not even the outlines of houses were visible, as if the city of white stone had been reabsorbed by the hills. It was a cool June night in Jerusalem, but many of the men were sweating. Their uniforms were olive green or camouflage-patterned, US Army surplus more suitable for the jungles of Vietnam than for urban warfare. Most of the men were in their twenties, reservists abruptly extracted from university or from farms. For most this would be their first war. They were entering battle already exhausted: many had stayed awake through the night before, too anxious for sleep.

It was just past midnight, and the men of the 55th Paratroopers Reserve Brigade were heading toward no-man's-land, the swath of barbed wire and minefields and trenches dividing Jordanian-held East Jerusalem from Israeli-held West Jerusalem. That morning the Israeli air force had launched a preemptive strike against Egypt, whose leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, had moved his army to the Israeli border, blockaded Israel's southern shipping route, and threatened the imminent destruction of the Jewish state. The Jordanian army had opened a second front in Jerusalem, shelling Jewish neighborhoods and hitting hundreds of apartments. Most residents were in shelters, all lights extinguished. Every so often a jeep or ambulance raced, without headlights, through the empty streets.

Lieutenant Avital Geva, twenty-six-year-old deputy commander of Company D, 28th Battalion, walked at the head of his men. He squinted into the darkness and saw nothing, not even shadows. Avital left the front of the line and walked alongside the men. "Spread out, guys," he urged quietly, "spread out."

Nearby, on a fourth-floor rooftop, Major Arik Achmon, chief intelligence officer of the 55th Brigade, was on the radio with the central front command near Tel Aviv, seeking information on the Jordanian troops barely a kilometer away. Headquarters didn't seem to know much more than he did. Until the night before, the brigade's battle plans had focused on a parachute jump into the Sinai Desert, and Arik had organized the necessary intelligence. But then, when the Jordanians began shelling Israel's capital, the men of the 55th were hastily dispatched onto requisitioned tourist buses and driven to Jerusalem.

A shell crashed into the facade of the building. Arik was covered with the dust of shattered bricks. "Helmets!" shouted Colonel Motta Gur, commander of the 55th Brigade. Arik checked himself: steady, as always.

The paratroopers filled the side streets that ended in no-man's-land. Sandbags were

piled before little stone houses with corrugated roofs. Flares formed red-and-white arcs, exposing the paratroopers, flashes of silhouettes.

Pavement erupted.

“Medic!” Dozens lay bleeding. Avital Geva rushed through the darkness, shouting people’s names.

A flash. Avital fell. “My face!” he screamed. “My face!” Someone laid him on a car, pointed a flashlight at his face. Covered with blood. Gasping, conscious, he was carried into a jeep, which sped through the exploding streets.

Corporal Yoel Bin-Nun, bearing on his back his unit’s communications box, ran through the blacked-out streets. In civilian life he was a yeshiva student and knew these Orthodox streets; now, though, he was totally disoriented. He was trying to find the men of the 71st Battalion, who were scheduled to be the first of the brigade’s three battalions to cross into no-man’s-land. They would be followed by the men of Yoel’s battalion, the 28th. And it was Yoel’s assignment to follow the 71st to the crossing area, radio his battalion, and then point a flashlight, guiding his fellow soldiers into East Jerusalem. But where was the 71st?

02:15. Israeli sappers cut an opening in the first line of barbed wire. Bangalore—long metal tubes filled with explosives—were extended through the opening and detonated, creating a narrow scorched path in the minefield.

Yoel Bin-Nun found the crossing point. Crouching, he aimed his flashlight toward the men behind him and repeated, “*Pirtza pirtza pirtza*”—breach breach breach.

THE PARATROOPERS WHO reunited Jerusalem in 1967 and restored Jewish sovereignty to the Holy City fulfilled a dream of two millennia. They changed the history of Israel and of the Middle East. They also changed my life.

In late June 1967, a few weeks after the end of the Six-Day War, I flew to Israel with my father. I was a fourteen-year-old boy from Brooklyn, and my father, a Holocaust survivor, had decided that he couldn’t keep away any longer.

Every evening, in the weeks leading up to the war, we would watch the news together. As Arab armies massed along Israel’s borders, demonstrators in the streets of Cairo and Damascus chanted “Death to Israel.” Yet the international community seemed indifferent. Even the United States, caught in an increasingly hopeless war in Vietnam, offered little more than sympathy. My father and I shared the same unspoken thought: again. Barely two decades after the Holocaust, the Jews were facing destruction again. Once again, we were alone.

And then, in six days, Israel reversed threat into unimagined victory. The Israeli army destroyed the Egyptian army and conquered the Sinai Desert, three times the size of the state of Israel, seized the Golan Heights from Syria, and routed the Jordanian army in the West Bank—the biblical Judea and Samaria, birthplace of the Jewish people. And the paratroopers reunited a divided Jerusalem.

A photograph taken of paratroopers at the Western Wall became the instant symbol of the war. In the photograph three young men stand, with the wall behind them, gazing into the distance. One holds his helmet in his hands. Their expressions are a combination of exhaustion, tenderness, and awe. At their moment of triumph they seem not like conquerors but like pilgrims at the end of a long journey.

The Israel I encountered that summer belonged to the paratroopers. The photograph

of the three paratroopers at the wall was everywhere. The radio played a song sung by a paratrooper named Meir Ariel, about “Jerusalem of iron, of lead and of blackness,” an attempt to remind a euphoric nation of the price of victory.

At the Wall I watched my father become a believing Jew. He had lost his faith in the Holocaust; but now, he said, he forgave God. The Protector of Israel had regained His will. It was possible for Jews to pray again.

I met my father’s two brothers who had survived the Holocaust, along with distant relatives whose relationship to us was too complicated to follow, post-Holocaust approximations of family. That summer everyone in Israel felt like family. Cars would stop and offer lifts to hikers who weren’t hitching. In a farming community on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, which had suffered for years under Syrian guns and whose children had grown up in air raid shelters, my father hugged and kissed a teenage girl walking by, and no one thought it untoward.

Israel celebrated its existence, life itself. We had done it: survived the twentieth century. Not merely survived but reversed annihilation into a kind of redemption, awakened from our worst nightmare into our most extravagant dream.

That summer Israel was possessed by messianic dreams of wholeness. There were those who believed that peace had finally come, and with it the end of the Jews’ exile from humanity. (Perhaps only Jews could conceive of a normal national life in messianic terms.) There were those whose longing for wholeness was soothed by the reunification of the divided land and the divided city, which some saw as precursor of the imminence of the messianic era, ending the fragmentation of humanity itself.

For my father the dream of wholeness was fulfilled by Jewish unity. Perhaps not since the revelation at Mount Sinai—when the people of Israel were camped “as one body with one heart,” as a famous rabbinic commentary put it—had the Jews been as united as we were in those terrible, exhilarating weeks of late spring 1967. The great weakness of the Jews, my father believed, was the temptation of schism, even in the face of catastrophe. But when we were united, he reassured me, no enemy could destroy us.

The ultimate expression of the Israeli dream of wholeness was the kibbutz, or agrarian commune. Several hundred were spread throughout the country, especially along the old borders. The kibbutz was an attempt to transcend human nature, replace selfishness with cooperation. Decisions were voted on by members, positions of authority rotated. Children were raised in communal homes away from parents and encouraged to run their own affairs. Many of Israel’s political leaders, and many of its leading soldiers, had been kibbutzniks. The Jewish state was the first democratic country to have been founded in large part by egalitarian collectives, and whose key institutions—trade unions, health clinics, bus cooperatives, even the army—were created by radical socialists.

Though the secular kibbutzim had no use for religion, they claimed its messianic vision of restoring the Jews to the land and creating a just society, a light to the nations. The kibbutz was the symbol of Israel in the world, and that seemed natural. The very existence of a sovereign Jewish state after two thousand years of homelessness defied the natural order, and so did the kibbutz. One utopian dream symbolized the other.

That summer I resolved to return one day and become an Israeli. Perhaps I would

move to a kibbutz. The great Jewish adventure was happening in my lifetime; how could I keep away?

IN THE SUMMER of 1982, at age twenty-nine, I moved to Israel as an immigrant. Israel had just invaded Lebanon, to end the threat of terrorist attacks on the Galilee (and, more grandiosely, to create a “new Middle East”). Instead of uniting Israelis, as it had in 1967, war now divided them. For the first time there were antigovernment demonstrations, even as soldiers were fighting at the front. The euphoria of the summer of '67, the delusion of a happy ending to Jewish history, had been replaced by an awareness of the agonizing complexity of Israel's dilemmas.

I was now a journalist, writing for American publications, including the New York City newspaper the *Village Voice*, and so I set about trying to understand my new home. Most urgently, that meant understanding Israel's schisms. On the streets people were shouting at each other about Lebanon. I covered the founding of West Bank settlements and followed the anticolonial movement Peace Now. I tried to listen to the conflicting certainties that divided those who saw the results of 1967 as blessing from those who saw them as curse. Israel was losing the feeling of family that had drawn me there in the first place. Much of my career became focused on explaining the unraveling of the Israeli consensus.

From time to time I thought about interviewing veterans of the battle of Jerusalem. In a sense they were responsible for bringing me to Israel. How had the war changed their lives? What role did they play in trying to influence the political outcome of their military victory?

Those questions were partly answered in a newspaper article I came across about a reunion of the paratroopers, which noted that some of the most prominent leaders of the settlement movement, as well as prominent activists in the peace movement, had emerged from the 55th Brigade. The men who as civilians were dividing Israel would meet every year on reserve duty, sharing tents and periodically going to war together. Did their ideological antipathies undermine their cohesion as soldiers? Or did their shared army experience temper the ferocity of their political differences? Perhaps someday, I thought, I'll write an article about them.

IN THE FALL of 2002, I began to seek them out. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process of the 1990s had collapsed, and suicide bombers were blowing up buses and cafés in my city, Jerusalem. The Israeli home front was now the battlefield. How, Israelis wondered, could it have come to this? Most Israelis believed that their country had tried to make peace, only to be rejected by the Palestinian leadership. Yet Israel was widely faulted around the world. Even many Israelis on the left were now wondering whether any amount of territorial concessions would gain Israel peace and legitimacy, whether the Jewish state would ever find its place in the Middle East and be accepted by the international community as a normal nation.

At that low point in Israel's history, I turned to the men who had brought Israel its most transcendent moment. In recounting their lives, I intended to tell the story of how we had gone from the hope of those days to the shattering now, and how we might reclaim something of the optimism on which Israel had been built.

By the time I encountered them in 2002, the veterans of the 55th Brigade were

middle-aged and older, no longer part of the reserves. I learned that in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, they had led the nighttime crossing of the Suez Canal onto the Egyptian mainland that turned the war in Israel's favor, one of the most daring military initiatives in the country's history. (They called their veterans' group the Association of Paratroopers Who Liberated Jerusalem and Crossed the Canal.) The 55th, then, had been in those years the Israeli army's elite combat force. I decided to write a narrative history of the post-'67 left-right schism, as experienced by leading personalities who had been paratroopers.

Probing deeper, I discovered an even more compelling aspect to this story. In 1967 perhaps half the soldiers of the 55th Brigade, and up to 70 percent of its officers, had been kibbutzniks. There was a second, if much smaller and militarily marginal, group within the brigade: religious Zionists, Orthodox Jews who celebrated the secular Jewish state as a divine miracle. After the Six-Day War religious Zionists, many of them convinced that redemption was imminent, initiated the West Bank settlement movement. In response, kibbutzniks helped found the peace movement that opposed the settlements.

Secular kibbutzniks and religious Zionists disagreed about God and faith and the place of religion in Jewish identity and in the life of the state. Yet for all their differences, religious Zionism and the secular kibbutz movement agreed that the goal of Jewish statehood must be more than the mere creation of a safe refuge for the Jewish people. Both movements saw the Jewish return home as an event of such shattering force that something grand—world transformative—must result. The founders of the kibbutz movement in the early years of the twentieth century envisioned the future Jewish state as a laboratory for democratic egalitarianism. Many religious Zionists believed that the creation of a Jewish state would be the catalyst for the messianic era.

Here, then, was a much bigger story about Israel than merely its left-right divide. It was a story about the fate of Israel's utopian dreams, the vast hopes imposed on this besieged, embattled strip of land crowded with traumatized Jewish refugees.

The meeting between religious Zionists and secular kibbutzniks in the 55th Brigade occurred at the most mythic moment in Israel's history. The return to the Wall, to the Old City of Jerusalem and the biblical lands just beyond, brought Judaism to the center of Israeli identity, from which it had been largely marginalized by Israel's secular founders.

THIS IS NOT a book about the Israeli paratroopers, though that is a story well worth telling.

Instead, this book tells the story, through the lives of seven paratroopers, of Israel's competing utopian dreams—and how the Israel symbolized by the kibbutz became the Israel symbolized by the settlement.

Even though about half of Israel's Jewish population is of Middle Eastern origin, the main characters here are all Ashkenazim, of European Jewish descent. That is because the great ideological struggles that defined Israel in its formative years were fought primarily among the state's founders and their children, most of whom were Ashkenazim. Israeli elites, especially in politics and the military, have in recent years become more reflective of the country's Jewish diversity. But that was not the case for

most of the decades covered by this book.

Among the religious Zionists portrayed here, one founded the first West Bank settlement, while another became the settlement movement's great heretic. Among the kibbutzniks, one helped found Peace Now and then abandoned the movement, convinced that peace with the Palestinians was impossible anytime soon.

These men not only helped define the political debate of post-'67 Israel but also its social and cultural transformations. Improbably, one former kibbutznik became a pioneer in the transition from a state-run economy to free-enterprise Israel. Another emerged as Israel's leading poet-singer, a bohemian symbol who then became an observant Jew.

Born and raised with the reborn Jewish state, they were the first sovereign Jews in two thousand years. Their lives were the fulfillment of Jewish longing to return to Zion. Their burden was to carry those expectations.

The paratrooper ethos demands initiative and responsibility, and as soldiers and as civilians, they internalized that code. To a large extent, Israel today lives in the partial fulfillment and partial failure of their contradictory dreams.

Often these seven men argued vehemently within me. At times I have agreed with each of them—and passionately disagreed with each of them. But even then—perhaps especially then—I remained moved by their courage, their faith in human initiative and contempt for self-pity, their dauntless quest for solutions to unbearable dilemmas that would intimidate others into paralysis. In the ten years I spent among the veterans of the 55th Brigade, I was often reminded why I decided, in the summer of 1967, to tie my future with theirs.

PART ONE

THE LIONS' GATE (MAY–JUNE 1967)



Chapter 1

MAY DAY

THE SOCIALISM OF “THE GANG”

IN THE ORANGE orchards of Kibbutz Ein Shemer, Avital Geva, barefoot and shirtless in the early-morning sun, was frying eggs in a blackened pan. Turkish coffee was boiling in the aluminum pot, and his friends were laying out plates of tomatoes and cucumbers and olives, white cheese and jam. “*Ya Allah*, what a feast!” exclaimed Avital, as if encountering for the first time the food he had eaten for breakfast every day since childhood.

It was mid-May 1967. Avital and his crew had been working since dawn, to outwit the heat of the day. Rather than return to the communal dining room for breakfast, the young men allowed themselves the privilege of eating together beneath the corrugated roof they’d erected for just that purpose. Could there be greater joy, thought Avital, than working the fields with one’s closest friends and sharing food grown by their kibbutz?

One could almost forget about the crisis on the Egyptian border.

Late spring was Avital’s favorite time in the orchards. The air was heavy with trees in flower. The last of the Valencia oranges had just been harvested, and the first swellings appeared of what would be the autumn harvest. Meanwhile the orchards had to be prepared for the long, dry summer. Every morning the crew dragged two dozen irrigation pipes, each six meters long, from row to row. Though only twenty-six years old, Avital had been appointed head of the orchards, one of the kibbutz’s main sources of income. Ein Shemer’s orchards were among the country’s most productive. Avital experimented with new machinery that would increase the harvest without entirely mechanizing the process, preserving a tactile encounter with the fruit. If you don’t say good morning to the tree, he had learned from the old-timers, the tree won’t say happy new year to you. Avital could spend an entire morning pruning a single tree, satisfying his artistic longings. “Michelangelo,” his friends called him, and half meant it.

Work in the orchards, Avital insisted, should be fun. When the kibbutz’s high school students were sent to help with the harvest, Avital dispatched tractors to retrieve them from their dormitories and gave them the wheel. Awaiting them in the orchards were bins of biscuits; during breaks, he made French fries, an extravagance in a kibbutz whose diet was determined by austere Polish cooks. He divided the young people into teams, and the one that filled the most bins won chocolate.

Avital's close-cropped hair exposed an expression at once tender and resolute. The lower lip protruded, and a sturdy chin rose to uphold it. His blue eyes seemed translucent.

"*Hevreh?*" he called out. "The eggs are ready!" Avital turned ordinary words into superlatives. And for Avital no word was more urgently joyful than *hevreh*—the gang—which he sang and elongated with new syllables. For Avital, *hevreh* was a kind of miracle, transforming separated beings into a single organism bound by common purpose, by love. The essence of kibbutz: a society of *hevreh*, in which no one was extraneous. Like poor Meir, heavy and sluggish, an Egyptian Jew lost among the Polish Jews of Ein Shemer, who'd been shunted from one part of the kibbutz workforce to the other until Avital insisted he join the *hevreh* in the orchards. And when they went on a bicycle trip up the steep hills to Nazareth, they brought Meir along, installing him like a peasant king on a couch mounted on a tractor-drawn wagon.

Banter around the breakfast table turned to the situation in the south. The crisis had begun a few days earlier, on Israel's Independence Day, when Egyptian president Nasser announced that he was dispatching troops toward the Egyptian-Israeli border. Then he ordered UN peacekeeping forces to quit the border, and incredibly, the UN complied. Now Egyptian troops and tanks were taking their place. Radio Cairo and Radio Damascus were broadcasting speeches by Arab leaders promising the imminent destruction of Israel.

"Why aren't they calling us up?" demanded Avital, a lieutenant in the 55th Brigade, the reservist unit of the elite paratroopers. How could he be sitting here while the country faced a threat to its life?

"Maybe there will be a diplomatic solution," someone suggested.

"Not with the Russians pushing the Arabs to war," someone else added. "When my two friends were killed by the Syrians, the Russian ambassador in the UN said that Israelis killed Israelis to blame the Syrians. That's when I finished with Mother Russia."

"Mother Russia," Avital repeated with contempt.

AS A CHILD, Avital had been confused about Marxism and the Soviet Union, and on Kibbutz Ein Shemer, that was a pedagogical problem. Ein Shemer belonged to the Marxist Zionist movement Hashomer Hatzair (the Young Watchman). Avital and his friends had been raised to revere the Soviet Union as the "second homeland," as movement leader Yaakov Hazan once put it. Beginning in second grade they were taught Marxist principles by rote. "An avant-garde alone cannot create a revolution!" they chanted. But what exactly was an avant-garde, wondered Avital, and what was its relationship to the children of Ein Shemer? The words seemed too big for him; he could hardly pronounce them. Other children seemed to readily grasp the difference between deceptive socialism and true communism; why couldn't he?

He was twelve years old in 1953 when Stalin died. Ein Shemer went into mourning. The annual satirical play performed on the spring holiday of Purim was canceled. The movement's newspaper, *Al Hamishmar* (On Vigilant Watch)—whose logo read, "For Zionism—For Socialism—For the Fraternity of Nations"—spread across the front page a heroic image of Stalin, his stern gaze focused on a distant

vision. “The Progressive World Mourns the Death of J. V. Stalin,” read the banner headline.

Of course Stalin’s death saddened Avital, but however terrible to admit, it seemed abstract to him. What did he really have to do with this man with the big mustache and row of medals on his chest? At Ein Shemer’s memorial, they played a recording of Stalin’s speech marking the victory over Nazism, but it was in Russian, and Avital couldn’t understand the words.

A few years later, when a new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, came to power and repudiated Stalinism, Hashomer Hatzair acknowledged that Stalin had made mistakes, even committed crimes. But lest we forget, insisted the ideological guides of the movement, it was not easy transforming a country of peasants into a communal society. The kibbutz and the Soviet Union were different aspects of the same historical march: the kibbutz an experiment in pure communism, the Soviet Union an experiment in mass communism. Both were necessary to prove the practicality of radical equality. And lest we forget: Stalin defeated Hitler, and the Red Army liberated Auschwitz. And in 1948 the Soviets had supported Jewish statehood and shipped Czech weapons to the IDF.

Avital was not indifferent to the Soviet romance: just as Europe had produced the ultimate evil, how right that it should produce the ultimate good. The weekly films screened on the kibbutz included Soviet-made features about the Red Army’s struggle against Nazism. Though the Hebrew subtitles were often out of sync with the images, watching those films was thrilling. In one, a Soviet soldier threw himself against a German machine-gun post, allowing his comrades to conquer the position.

Sometimes Hazan—as everyone in the movement called Yaakov Hazan, revered leader of Hashomer Hatzair—would visit Avital’s parents, old friends from Warsaw. Avital would eavesdrop on their conversation about the latest “important and fateful matter,” as Hazan put it, before slipping away in boredom. Afterward, what he’d recall wasn’t Hazan’s analysis but the warmth with which Hazan and his parents interacted, without any sense of distance. Just like the two Ein Shemer comrades who happened to be members of the Knesset but who took their turn like everyone else serving in the dining room.

Avital loved Ein Shemer, with its modest members riding rusty bicycles in their work clothes and *kova tembel*, the brimless, floppy “fools’ hat” whose very name was self-deprecating. Almost everything here had been planted or built by their own hands. Everyone was valued for who they were, not only for what they did.

For the founders of Ein Shemer, physical labor was an act of devotion, virtually a religious ritual. Working the land of Israel became a substitute faith for the Jewish tradition they abandoned; the socialist Zionist poet Avraham Shlonsky compared the roads being built by pioneers to straps of phylacteries, and the houses to its black boxes. The kibbutz transformed holidays from religious events into celebrations of the agricultural cycle, just as they were in ancient Israel, except without God. Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year but which lacked agricultural symbolism, was just another workday on Ein Shemer.

SONG OF THE FOREST