

Theater in Jewish DPs Camps in Italy: A Stage for Political and Ideological Debate on *Aliyah*, Zionism and Jewish identity

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Abstract

This article focuses on theater as a form of cultural, political and ideological training for aliyah aimed at Jewish displaced persons (DPs) in postwar Italy. Exploring the private archives of the Zionist emissary Zvi Aldouby, we intend to move beyond the traditional idea of hachsharah as a preparation for aliyah based primarily on physical and agricultural training. This analysis relates on a set of diverse sources, ranging from institutional reports, official and informal correspondence, personal notes, sketches, photographs and drawings. Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, the article is divided in two parts. The first one frames Aldouby's mission in relation to the rehabilitative programs and the political landscape within the refugee camps. The second part explores the birth of a dramatic circle founded by Aldouby and analyzes two theatrical plays directed by him, The Golem (Ha-Golem) by H. Leivick and This Land (Ha-Adamah Ha-Zot) by A. Ashman. Through the analysis of Aldouby mission, the article emphasizes the role of culture among Jewish DPs as well as the political motivations behind it. In this scenario, characterized by the Jewish DPs' efforts to start a new life and the Zionist emissaries' endeavor to organize their aliyah, theater became the stage to promote and discuss new understandings of home and identity.

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Introduction*

After the massive repatriation procedure implemented by the Allies between the summer of 1945 and the beginning of 1946, there were still one million displaced people in refugee camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. Among them there were around 100,000 Jews of different nationalities. This was the estimate published in April 1946 by the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry, in charge of “examin[ing] political, economic and social conditions in Palestine as they bear upon the problem of Jewish immigration [from Europe] and settlement therein [...]”¹ At that time Italy hosted only 20% of the remaining 100,000 Jewish DPs,

* The authors of the article thank the Aldouby family for sharing Zvi Aldouby’s private archives. We are also grateful to Roni Cohen and David Fishof for their invaluable assistance in translating the Yiddish sources from Aldouby’s archives. All the Hebrew sources in this article were translated by the authors. Unless otherwise specified, all the images included in the article are from Zvi Aldouby’s private collection, published by courtesy of the Aldouby family. The entire article was produced collaboratively by the three authors. The introduction and conclusion were written jointly, while specific sections were composed individually: Chiara Renzo wrote Part I (pp. 108-127); Achinoam Aldouby and Michal Peles-Almagor co-authored Part II (pp. 127-150).

¹ Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry, ed., *Report of the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry Regarding the Problems of European Jewry and Palestine, Lausanne, April 20, 1946* (London: H.M.S.O, 1946).

but this relatively small group of refugees nonetheless triggered transnational processes with unpredictable outcomes.²

The Jewish DPs who had arrived in Italy were strongly motivated to leave Europe as soon as possible. While many countries were reluctant to open their doors to refugees, they were attracted by the possibility of illegal migration to Palestine. In this scenario, Italy became a key site of transit and the headquarters of the Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet, the underground branch of the Jewish Agency in charge of organizing the departures of clandestine ships from Europe to Palestine. In fact, from 1939 the British Mandate had established strict limitations on Jewish migration to Palestine, forcing Jewish DPs to remain in the refugee camps.³ The Jewish DPs' long wait in Italy, however, turned into a time of training for *aliyah*, with the aim of acquainting them with Zionist pioneering ideology.

Hachsharot (from the Hebrew word which means “preparation, training”) were the paradigmatic tool through which Zionist organizations prepared the candidates for aliyah. The hachsharot, however, were also paradigmatic of the factionalism prevailing among the political parties in the DP camps. The controversies arising from the implementation of these Zionist-oriented programs originated mainly from the emissaries of the political movements (in Hebrew, *shlichim*) sent by the *Yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in Palestine) to the refugee camps from late 1945. Supervised by the Merkaz He-Halutz (The Pioneer Center)—the umbrella organization that coordinated the activities of the youth movements—the emissaries ran the hachsharot according to their affiliation and competed with each other to attract more Jewish DPs to their parties. For this purpose, they designed specific programs to rehabilitate and train Jewish DPs for aliyah, which included not only agricultural or vocational training but also a series of wide-ranging cultural activities.

² For a comprehensive bibliography on DPs in postwar Europe we refer to the website of the Arolsen Archives. Accessed March 23, 2022, <https://arolsen-archives.org/en/news/dp-bibliographie-online/>.

³ Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944* (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Idit Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: The Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).



Fig. 1. Zvi Aldouby (standing on the left) with a group of students and teachers of the school in Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp, 1946, Photo 16/2, Aldouby' Private Collection, Jerusalem.

In the context of the Zionist movement, the *hachsharot* implemented the idea of preparing Jewish candidates for aliyah, primarily through agricultural training. In this article we seek to move beyond the traditional notion of a physical *hachasharah*, offering a new perspective that centers on culture and education in DP camps. Drawing on unpublished primary sources from the private archives of the emissary Zvi Yehuda Aldouby (1904-1996), we argue that cultural programs in the refugee camps, in particular theater, created a stage for political and ideological debate surrounding Zionism, Jewish identity and aliyah.

Aldouby grew up in Galicia, in a Chasidic Zionist family. When he was ten years old, his father was murdered in front of his whole family while protecting a Jewish girl who was trying to escape from a Russian soldier who was harassing her.⁴ Following this traumatic event, the family decided to immigrate to Palestine.⁵ In

⁴ At that time, his family changed their last name to Aldouby, an acronym of their late father's name: Asher Lemel Dov Ben Yakov.

⁵ During his mission among Jewish DPs in Italy, Aldouby wrote a poem called "My Rupinkah," recalling his longing for his childhood hometown in Galicia. *My Rupinkah*, undated, file 103, Zvi Aldouby Private Archives (hereafter ZAPA), Jerusalem, Israel, [Hebrew].

Jerusalem, Aldouby graduated in Liberal Arts at the Hebrew University and obtained the diploma of education from the Hebrew Teachers' Seminary. He worked as a teacher in the Tel Amal school in Tel Aviv until the summer of 1946, when he started his mission as an emissary of the leading labour party Mapai in Italy. In the refugee camps, he was in charge of culture and education until February 1948. His personal journals, notes, letters, photographs, and other forms of correspondence offer a new and unique understanding of the cultural life of Jewish DPs as well as the political motivation at the heart of these cultural activities.

Considering the Jewish DPs' preparation for aliyah as both a political and cultural laboratory, this article aims to understand the role of theater as a social event bringing together educational and ideological mechanisms. To tackle the challenge of grasping the experiential dimension of the Jewish DPs' theater performances—ephemeral by nature—we adopt an interdisciplinary approach, which allows us to analyze a set of diverse sources, ranging from institutional reports, official and informal correspondence, personal notes, sketches, photographs and drawings.⁶ This vast documentation, albeit fragmented, helped us reconstruct the historical context in which these theatrical performances were produced, and to understand the multifaceted meaning of the live events.

The first part of the article frames the activities of Merkaz He-Halutz's emissaries against the backdrop of the rehabilitation programs and the underground operations of the Aliyah Bet in Italy. It focuses on Zvi Aldouby's mission in the Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp (in the region of Apulia, southern Italy),⁷ where he was in charge of "cultural affairs." At his arrival in the refugee camp, he found a considerable number of children and teenagers, part of whom had already joined Zionist-oriented educational programs. Moreover, distributed across several hachsharot there were both groups waiting to leave for Palestine as well as families who wanted to emigrate to North America, Argentina, Brazil, and Australia. Faced with this heterogeneous community of DPs, Aldouby extended the idea of

⁶ For a recent seminal study which emphasizes the analysis of ephemeral sources to understand Modernist Hebrew theater see: Ruthie Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices: Aural Remains from Modernist Hebrew Theater* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019).

⁷ In almost all the primary sources Santa Maria al Bagno is referred to as "Di Bagni" or "Santa Croce", which was a neighborhood of the Santa Maria al Bagno village.

“training for aliyah” to embrace theater as a channel to introduce Zionist values, with the potential to reach a wider audience and to overcome the divisions within the camp. The rejection of the diaspora, the sacrifices of the pioneers, the sense of belonging to *Eretz Israel* are elaborated by Aldouby in a rich production of scripts which ranged from schools’ exhibitions to theatrical performances.

This is particularly evident in the second part of the article, which uncovers the birth of the dramatic circle “Tkumah” (in Hebrew, Revival), founded by Aldouby, and offers an in-depth analysis of two theatrical plays directed by him, *The Golem (Ha-Golem)* by H. Leivick and *This Land (Ha-Adamah Ha-Zot)* by A. Ashman. Both plays were landmarks in the emergence of Zionist theater and Hebrew drama, and had been performed by the Habima Theater Company, in 1925 and 1940, respectively. Questioning the future of Jews’ lives in the diaspora, Aldouby’s educational approach to aliyah training started an ideological debate through theater, which offered an evocative representation of Eretz Israel as a place that was both promising and challenging.

Aldouby’s archives reveal that the work of Yishuv’s emissaries was not limited to traditional agricultural training. This article indeed argues that Zvi Aldouby’s theatrical productions aimed to provide Jewish DPs with new understandings of home and identity after the Holocaust.

Part I

Wandering towards Palestine

In February 1946, the Organization of Jewish Refugees in Italy (OJRI)—the Jewish DPs’ official representative body established in November 1945—published a short pamphlet entitled “We, Jewish Refugees in Italy.”⁸ It summarized the results of a questionnaire previously distributed among the Jews in the refugee camps in Italy. It asked to provide details on their life during the war as well as their wishes for the future. The pamphlet depicted the Jewish DPs in

⁸ The Organization of Jewish Refugees in Italy, ed., *We Jewish Refugees in Italy... The Results of an Inquiry* (Rome: n. p., 1946).

Italy as young (57% of them were between seventeen and twenty-five years old and another 37% were between twenty-six and fifty years old), mostly of Polish origin (72%) and without relatives (75%). They were strongly determined not to return to their former countries, and for this reason they were all “wandering toward Palestine.”

This escape movement “from unsatisfactory or even dangerous conditions to what was hoped would be a better future” is better known with the Hebrew term *Brichah* (literally, “flight”).⁹ The *Brichah* started in the area liberated by the Red Army in late 1944 by ghetto fighters and Jewish partisans who had started to seek possible routes to reach Palestine. At the end of the war, this originally spontaneous movement turned into an organized one when *Brichah* leaders emigrated to Palestine and their places were taken by Jewish soldiers and emissaries from the *Yishuv*, who connected the *Brichah* with the clandestine departures organized by the *Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet*.¹⁰

In this context, the meeting between European Jews and the Jewish soldiers who served in the Allied Army was a crucial moment. Those soldiers were mainly young men in their twenties, graduates of Zionist youth movements and members of *kibbutzim*, who enlisted as volunteers to join the British Army in North Africa in 1942, and in 1944 were gathered into the Jewish Brigade.¹¹

From their arrival in southern Italy in 1943 and until the Allied Headquarters allowed international humanitarian organizations to start their mission in Italy in 1945, Jewish soldiers made several efforts to provide Jewish DPs with better living

⁹ Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah* (New York: Random House, 1970), viii.

¹⁰ On the activities of the *Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet* in Italy, see: Mario Toscano, *La ‘Porta di Sion’: l’Italia e l’immigrazione clandestina ebraica in Palestina, 1945-1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Ada Sereni, *I clandestini del mare. L’emigrazione ebraica in terra d’Israele dal 1945 al 1948* (Milano: Mursia, 1973).

¹¹ Yoav Gelber, “The Meeting Between the Jewish Soldiers from Palestine Serving in the British Army and the She’erit Hapletah,” in *Sherith Hapletah, 1944-1948: Rehabilitation and Political Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yád Vashem International Historical Conference*, eds. Israel Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem, October 1985), (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1990), 60-79; Morris Beckman, *The Jewish Brigade: An Army with Two Masters 1944-1945* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1998). For an overview on the Jewish Brigade in Italy see also the recent study by Gianluca Fantoni, *Storia della Brigata ebraica. Gli ebrei della Palestina che combatterono in Italia nella Seconda guerra mondiale* (Torino: Einaudi, 2022).

conditions. In parallel, they also offered moral support and encouraged them to refuse repatriation, claiming for their right to make aliyah.¹²

In October 1945, during a visit to the DP camp in Santa Maria al Bagno, Rabbi Jacob Kraft, who served as chaplain in the Allied Army between 1943 and 1946, was impressed by the outcomes of Jewish soldiers' activism among Jewish DPs. In particular, he reported about his meeting with the children living in the youth village established and managed by the Jewish soldiers:

I had wondered what gave this zestful enthusiasm to these children. Their spirits were high, they seemed so keenly alive, so intensely eager, despite the poverty of their surroundings and the paucity of their possessions. I discovered the reason that morning. Palestinian youth had accomplished one of the amazing miracles of spiritual reclamation and rehabilitation. [...] In some of the classrooms there is only one text for the entire class. I have seen the upright backs of beds used as blackboards. Yet, the work is being done. [...] The educational policy (prominently displayed on every bulletin board) was to instill in the children a love for Zion, and acquaintance with our [Jewish] culture and a desire to rebuild the land. [...] On the walls of the bedrooms and the few classrooms of each *kvutzah* [group] the children have hung their "pin ups"; these are pictures of Herzl, Bialik, Ussishkin, Czernichovsky, Trumpeldor, Jabotinski.¹³

¹² Alex Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame: American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors of European Jewry, 1944-1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Dina Porat, "One Side of the Jewish Triangle in Italy: The Encounter of Italian Jews with Holocaust Survivors and Hebrew Soldiers and Zionist Representatives in Italy, 1944-1946," in *Italia Judaica. Gli ebrei nell'Italia unita 1870-1945. Atti del convegno internazionale (Siena, 12-16 giugno 1989)* (Roma: Ministero Beni Culturali e Ambientali, 1993), 487-513.

¹³ Jacob Kraft, "From Santa Maria – Whither? October 1945," IT-IT-1296, Activities of the American military chaplains in the refugee camps of southern Italy: Santa Maria di Bagni, Ferramonti, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem.



Fig. 2. Students and teachers of the school in Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp at the Hanukkah celebrations in December 1946, Photo 19/1, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The youth village in the Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp was part of the hachsharah system launched by Jewish soldiers soon after the liberation of the Ferramonti internment camp, in southern Italy.¹⁴ Since early 1944 Jewish soldiers had started to organize small groups of children and teenagers, either unaccompanied or separated from their families, to establish the first hachsharot in the surroundings of the DP camps set up by the Allies in Apulia.¹⁵

¹⁴ In September 1943, the Allies liberated around 2,000 (mostly foreign) Jews from the Fascist internment camp in Ferramonti di Tarsia (Cosenza, Calabria), see Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Ferramonti. La vita e gli uomini del più grande campo d'internamento fascista (1940-1945)* (Florence: Giuntina, 1987). The Red Cross estimated that in 1943 there were 6,386 foreign Jews interned by the Fascist government in Italy, both in forced residency (*internamento libero*) and in concentration camps. For more about the Fascist internment system during World War II see Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Mussolini's Camps: Civilian Internment in Fascist Italy (1940-1943)* (London: Routledge, 2019); For more about the foreign Jews and the Italian racial laws see Klaus Voigt, *Il rifugio precario. Gli esuli in Italia dal 1933 al 1945*, vol. 1 (Scandicci: La Nuova Italia, 1993), 291-374; for an analysis of Jews' situation in Italy during Fascism see Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

¹⁵ On the establishment of the first hachsharot for children in 1944 and their development see Chiara Renzo, "‘To Build and Be Built’: Jewish Displaced Children in Post-War Italy, 1943-1948," in *Child Migration and Biopolitics. Old and New Experiences in Europe*, eds. Beatrice Scutaru and Simone Paoli (London: Routledge, 2020).

Within a short time, however, the collective lifestyle of the hachsharot appealed to an increasing number of Jewish DPs who had arrived in Italy after the end of the war. At this early stage Jewish soldiers run their training programs among Jewish DPs in a general Zionist framework, avoiding partisanship in order not to compromise unity:

Within the committee of the [Jewish] Brigade and the Center for the Diaspora¹⁶ – where the vast majority are representatives of Po'alei Agudat Israel, Achdut Ha-'Avodah, and Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir – it was unanimously decided to collaborate in the refugee camps in Italy and Germany and to not establish separate frameworks by origin and political affiliation.¹⁷

As we shall see, it was the possibility of living in a supportive environment that granted care and offered a daily schedule, more than the political ideology behind it, that attracted a growing number of Jewish DPs to Italy. However, at the end of the war in 1945, the increasing number of Jewish DPs and the arrival of new actors engaged in assisting them brought relevant administrative and socio-political changes to the refugee camps. This led to the institutionalization and quick expansion of the hachsharot and the rehabilitation programs introduced by Jewish soldiers.

The first change relates to the number of the humanitarian organizations that were gradually authorized to enter Italy at the end of military operations, and their impact. In 1945, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the chief intergovernmental agency in charge of the administration of DP camps, started its mission in Italy. By virtue of a system of mandates, UNRRA was able to share the challenging task of taking care and rehabilitating the people displaced by war with dozens of other organizations, working under its

¹⁶ The Center for the Diaspora (in Hebrew, Merkaz La-Golah) was established by Jewish soldiers in Italy in October 1944, following the establishment of the Jewish Brigade. It was previously known as the Refugee Center (in Hebrew, Merkaz Ha-Plitim) and was founded in 1943 by the Jewish Palestinian Units who arrived in southern Italy along with the Allied Army.

¹⁷ The original document is reported in Yakov Markovitzky, *Buds of Resurrection: The Center for the Diaspora and Local Activities in Italy 1944-1948* (Tel Aviv: Merkaz La-Golah, 1997), 62, [Hebrew].

supervision.¹⁸ As pointed out by the extensive historiography dealing with the relief of Jews in post-war Europe, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was the leading Jewish humanitarian organization which cooperated with UNRRA to ameliorate the living condition of Jewish DPs in the refugee camps. Especially in Italy, the JDC gained a great degree of autonomy from UNRRA and coordinated the work of all the forces involved in aiding the Jews in the country, including the representative institutions of both the Yishuv and the Jewish DPs.¹⁹

Though frequently clashing over methods and approaches with the Zionist organizations, the apolitical JDC supported and integrated in its rehabilitative programs both the facilities and the activities already launched by Jewish soldiers, because of their functionality and rehabilitative capacity. In particular, the JDC mission in Italy looked at “the money spent for educational and recreational purposes [as the] most productive of morale building values” and at hachsharot as “excellent opportunities” to make Jewish DPs acquaint themselves again with a homely environment and normal style of living.²⁰ As a consequence of the autonomy, mediation and support of the JDC, the UNRRA accepted these programs as models of active welfare in line with the principles advocated by the international humanitarianism of that time.²¹

¹⁸ On the UNRRA mission in Italy see: Silvia Salvatici, “‘Not enough food to feed the people’. L’UNRRA in Italia (1944-1945),” *Contemporanea. Rivista di Storia dell’800 e del ‘900* 1 (2011): 83-99; on the management of the refugee emergency in Italy see Silvia Salvatici, “Between National and International Mandates: Displaced Persons and Refugees in Post-War Italy,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 3 (2014): 514-536.

¹⁹ On the cooperation between the UN refugee agencies and the JDC see Chiara Renzo, “‘Our Hopes Are Not Lost Yet’: The Jewish Displaced Persons in Italy: Relief, Rehabilitation and Self-understanding (1943-1948),” *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 12 (December 2017): 101-104.

²⁰ Letter from Benjamin N. Brook to Julian L. Tomlin, 15 December 1945, Italy: Hachsharoth, 1945-1950, NY AR194554/4/44/12/656, Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (hereafter AJDC), New York; Contents: Country – Italy, 18 February 1947, Italy, General, 1946, NY AR194554/4/44/2/628, AJDC.

²¹ Under the JDC-UNRRA agreement, the Jewish DPs living in hachsharot had the status of “out-of-camp refugees,” eligible to receive UNRRA assistance. The agreement was limited to only 7,500 Jewish DPs, for whom UNRRA guaranteed 3,000 Lira per person monthly and took on responsibility for providing basic necessities, i.e. housing, food, clothing, etc. After many difficulties the JDC was able to renew the same agreement with the International Refugee

The second change relates to the consequences of the Jewish Agency's new policy regarding aliyah, that now sacrificed quality for quantity, and the rising influence of the Yishuv in the refugee camps. By the end of the summer of 1945, the Center for the Diaspora was discussing alternative ways to continue its program among Jewish DPs, which was now threatened by the Jewish Brigade's relocation to Belgium. For this purpose, the Merkaz La-Golah established a unified pioneering Zionist organization, the Merkaz He-Halutz, and urged the Yishuv to send teachers and educators to Italy. The arrival of the civilian emissaries of the pioneering movements and the parties which, at that time, formed the political forces within the Jewish Agency definitely compromised the unity advocated by Jewish soldiers.

Complaining that the activities of the Center for the Diaspora put the the Mapai in a hegemonic position at the expense of the other parties, many shlichim started a political campaign to recruit more affiliates from the "pioneering reservoir of the Diaspora" living in the refugee camps.²² From that moment on, in a way that reproduced the political tensions characterizing the Yishuv of that time, each hachsharah managed by the Merkaz He-Halutz was affiliated to a specific movement among Gordonia, Dror, Ha-No'ar Ha-Tzioni, Ha-Bonim, Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir, Ha-'Oved, Po'alei 'Agudat Israel and Po'alei Mizrahi.

Organization (IRO), which replaced UNRRA from mid-1947. Letter from Jacob L. Trobe to Mr. H. Katzki, 19 February 1947, Italy 1947, G 45-54/4/13 /14/ IT.107, AJDC.

²² Yakov Markowitzky, "An elite servant or a hunter of political souls. Emissaries of the working-class settlement and the Zionist pioneering movements in the DP camps in Italy (1945-1948)," *Dapim Lehaker Ha-Tkufat Ha-Shoah, Institute for the Study of the Holocaust Period* (1998): 131-148, [Hebrew].



Fig. 3. Aldouby and representatives of the groups “Nitzanim” and “Dror” from the youth village in Santa Maria al Bagno during the joint Sukkot celebration of the UNRRA DP camps in Lecce province, southern Italy, 1946, Photo 23/1, Aldouby’s Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The emissaries’ activities were directly linked to the underground activities of *Brichah* and the Mossad le-Aliyah Bet, whose illegal immigrants were selected from the refugee camps and the hachsharot according to migration quotas which reflected the political consensus of the pioneering movements in Palestine. In recent years, historians have been able to estimate that up to seventy or seventy-five hachsharot existed in Italy between 1946 and 1948.²³ Moreover, from the analysis of the records of the Merkaz He-Halutz, additional statistical data has emerged: between August 1945 and August 1948 around 19,800 Jews left from Italy with the Aliyah Bet, and 80% of them came from the hachsharot.²⁴

²³ For an overall picture of the hachsharot in postwar Italy see Arturo Marzano, “Relief and rehabilitation of Jewish DPs after the Shoah: The Hachsharot in Italy (1945-48),” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2019): 314-329.

²⁴ He-Halutz Ba-Brichah U-Be-Ha’apalah 1946-1949, Testimonies, AR-T-00041-021, Massuah Archives (hereafter MA), Tel Itzhak, Israel [Hebrew].

The Role of Culture: Zvi Aldouby in the Santa Maria al Bagno DP Camp

While working for their ultimate goal—i.e., the aliyah of as many Jewish survivors as possible—emissaries developed varied programs to educate Jewish DPs about Zionism and strengthened already existing institutions to focus on this purpose. As noted by Ada Sereni, one of the first Italian Jewish pioneers and a leading figure of the Mossad Le-Aliyah Bet in post-war Italy, the emissaries' activism among Jewish DPs was deleterious but at the same time necessary. On the one hand, the pervasive Zionist propaganda and the internal divisions within the Merkaz He-Halutz caused disconnections and negatively affected the challenging life of Jewish DPs in hachsharot and refugee camps. Indeed, Jewish DPs often displayed disappointment over the emissaries' failure to honor their promise of an imminent aliyah. On the other hand, Sereni also recognized in the emissaries a driving force that stimulated Jewish DPs to transcend their current situation by focusing on the future. Indeed, the emissaries' arrival bolstered the cultural and educational activities that had been organized in refugee camps and hachsharot since the beginning of the piecemeal liberation of the country in 1943.

In fact, OJRI created the Culture and Education Division, in charge of designing a comprehensive program which included general education, cultural and religious activities, vocational training projects, recreation and sports. Supervised and supported by the JDC Educational Department and UNRRA, the OJRI arranged a system of kindergartens and schools for children between 3 and 18 years old, trained teachers, opened club and reading rooms, supported the organization of dramatic and choral groups, bands, orchestras and sport teams, and distributed reading and writing material, as well as sport equipment.²⁵ Not surprisingly, the Merkaz He-Halutz played a leading role in designing the educational programs both in the hachsharot, where it directly dictated the guidelines, and indirectly in the refugee camps through its members working in the UNRRA Welfare Team. Among them was Zvi Aldouby, who in June 1946 was assigned by the Merkaz He-

²⁵ In 1947 the Culture and Education Division of OJRI was able to open ten kindergartens for around 250 children and 46 classes for around 800 children of school age living in the refugee camps. The school program included three main curricula: general subjects (mathematics, geography, science, history and geography of Eretz Israel), Jewish studies (Bible and Hebrew), and artistic subjects (drawing, music, gymnastics, handicrafts). See Report, Subject: Various Reports, July 19 1946, Italy General 1946, p. 6, AJDC.

Halutz to the UNRRA DP camp n. 34 in Santa Maria al Bagno as coordinator of “cultural affairs.”²⁶ He, indeed, concentrated all his efforts into improving the school system and actively involved Jewish DPs in cultural activities, especially through theater and performance arts.

When Aldouby arrived in Santa Maria al Bagno, at the southern edge of Italy’s “heel,” there were 1,995 Jewish DPs temporarily accommodated in several clusters of villas along the coast. At that time, the Merkaz He-Halutz reported that some of them were organized in six hachsharot located within the refugee camp itself and affiliated to different movements: one to Gordonia, one to Ha-No’ar Ha-Tzioni, two to Ha-’Oved, one to Po’alei Agudat Israel and another one to Po’alei Mizrahi. This estimate included 201 children up to seven years old and another 84 between the ages of seven and eighteen.²⁷

Faced with this diverse population, Aldouby advocated a general socialist Zionist approach, conceiving his educational task as a national duty and insisted on the importance of giving a “distinct pedagogical and pioneer character” to every educational and cultural activity.²⁸ Aldouby documented the tensions behind the development of such activities in the camps and hachsharot, helping us understand how culture was envisaged by some emissaries as a powerful political tool for both the rehabilitation of survivors and the construction of their pioneering identity.

Since his arrival in Santa Maria al Bagno, Aldouby prioritized the school education of children and teenagers, most of whom lived in the above-mentioned youth village founded by Jewish soldiers. Aware of the difficulties of dealing with young DPs with different backgrounds and traumatic past experiences, he drafted several questionnaires to learn about their previous school years, their personalities and attitudes.²⁹ Aldouby then designed a curriculum that included both traditional

²⁶ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p.1, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

²⁷ Monthly Report – Southern Camps, August 1, 1946, Italy General 1946, NY AR194554/4/44/2/628, AJDC; He-Halutz Ba-Brichah U-Be-Ha’apalah 1946-1949, Testimonies, AR-T-00041-021, pp. 66-74, MA, [Hebrew].

²⁸ Education to-day, undated, File 222, ZAPA.

²⁹ Pedagogical-medical questionnaire for refugee children in the Diaspora, 1946, File 170, ZAPA, [Hebrew]; Questionnaire for the educator, undated, File 171, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

school subjects and extracurricular activities aimed at strengthening their knowledge of Jewish traditions and life in Eretz Israel.³⁰

The majority of the children in Santa Maria al Bagno were orphans or sons and daughters of survivors of Eastern European origins. Only a few of them, especially the oldest ones, were Jews of Yugoslav origin whose families had been liberated by the Allies from Fascist internment camps in Italy between 1943 and 1944. From Aldouby's papers it emerges that he was able to establish soon an affectionate and constructive relationship with the first group of children, while his relationship with the Yugoslav children and their families was quite complicated. The conflicts between the Yugoslav Jewish DPs in Santa Maria al Bagno and Aldouby essentially arose from his idea that the "sons of Israel" should be rigorously educated within a Jewish—and preferably Zionist—surrounding. He was concerned that the Yugoslav Jewish children attended the high school in the nearby town, and were brought there every day by UNRRA's trucks. From Aldouby's perspective, these children were educated "in the shadow of the cross, [...] in Jesuit schools on the knees of the clergy," and risked having their attachment to Eretz Israel compromised. For this reason, he asked UNRRA's support to organize a high-school class for them within the refugee camp, but his proposal was not accepted, supposedly because of the general lack of teachers and the difficulty of supporting schools for small groups of students. Aldouby's suggestion was also opposed by the parents of this group of high-school students, who encouraged their children to learn Italian and obtain the Italian diploma, which could be more useful for their plans to emigrate to South America. Eventually, however, during the summer holidays Aldouby was able to engage the Yugoslav children in Hebrew classes and several social activities (a choir, sports, preparation for the celebration of Sukkot).³¹

An extensive collection of drawings, letters and greetings cards produced by his young students in the DP camps demonstrate his close relationship with these children and the results of his teachings. In developing his educational and cultural programs, Aldouby was very attentive to the needs of each category of Jewish DPs in Santa Maria al Bagno and designed an extensive range of activities in order to

³⁰ Three-year curriculum, 2 December 1946, File 124, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

³¹ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 11, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

extend the pioneering knowledge to the widest possible audience. Beyond his commitment to organized formal education, he submitted to the UNRRA a detailed program and budget to organize summer colonies for children with the ultimate goal of facilitating their physical and mental recovery and helping them boost their community bonds “in an atmosphere of happiness and creative activities.”³² For the Jewish DPs living in the hachsharot he organized a series of lectures on the history of the Yishuv, the administrative and political composition of the Jewish Agency and the other Jewish institutions in British Palestine.³³ Moreover, for the adults, he outlined the project for a “mobile popular university” with the purpose of offering basic lectures on different topics (arithmetic, natural physics, geography, economics, history and arts), supported by illustrations, diagrams, projectors.³⁴

However, what emerges as the constant and most characterizing feature of Zvi Aldouby’s educational mission in Italy is the use of performance arts, and especially theater, which he considered an “influential channel of pioneering education.”³⁵

Aldouby’s Theater: A Springboard Toward a New Identity

Aldouby’s private archives include a rare collection of scripts and sketches that he prepared for theatrical performances and schools’ exhibitions. On the one hand, as we shall see in the second part of this article, he dedicated his mission to the establishment of a dramatic circle which could put on stage a Zionist-oriented repertoire. On the other, in his role as teacher and educator, Aldouby arranged several recitals and plays for children. Indeed, he frequently organized public events that, in turn, became not merely a way to entertain or share his students’ achievements, but also served as a medium to reach the camp population at large and revive their abruptly halted connection with Jewish culture and traditions,

³² Summer Colony for Jewish refugee-children, April 23, 1947, File 216, ZAPA.

³³ Course for workers in IRO-JDC hachsharot, undated, File 218, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

³⁴ Mobile popular university, October 22, 1946, File 213, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

³⁵ Zvi Aldouby to Dobkin, February 10, 1947, File 167, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

rekindling their sense of belonging to a specific “ethnic and national group,” as Aldouby used to say.³⁶

Artistic expressions and performances by Jewish DPs are mentioned in many studies on DP camps and hachsharah in Europe. As for Italy, the picture is still patchy, but Aldouby’s archives offer a unique opportunity to understand the political role of theater as an educational and ideological tool for encouraging aliyah.

In Italy, OJRI (since its foundation in 1945) recognized the importance of the promotion of cultural and artistic events, and entrusted it to the Artistic Ensemble. This was a group of Jewish DP intellectuals and artists (including writers, musicians, singers, dancers, actors, and painters), directed by the Latvian poet Menahem Riger and based in the Kibbutz Omanut (art, in Hebrew) in Castelgandolfo, near Rome. The Artistic Ensemble was indeed in charge of touring refugee camps and hachsharot in small mobile units to organize classes, perform, train instructors, encourage and organize artistic activities.³⁷

The leaders and the performances of the Artistic Ensemble received great coverage in the Yiddish press circulating among the Jewish DPs, which reported about seventy concerts and theatrical productions in 1947. According to *In Gang*, the literary magazine directed by the Union of the Jewish Writers, Journalists and Artists in Italy (members of Kibbutz Omanut), the Artistic Ensemble was created “to bring joy to the refugees through words and songs” and its revival of the (diasporic) Jewish culture in the refugee camps was interpreted as a form of revenge:³⁸

The Germans exterminated the Jews. But for their culture they found no gas chamber. Culture survived. ... Revenge! Revenge was demanded by the thousands of writings left on the walls of German prisons. [...] And

³⁶ Throughout his writings, Zvi Aldouby often used the Hebrew term ‘eda (עדה), ethnic group, to refer to the Jewish DPs.

³⁷ Monthly Report – Southern Camps, August 1, 1946, Italy General 1946, NY AR194554/4/44/2/628, AJDC.

³⁸ The Yiddish magazine *In gang: khoydesh-zhurnal far literatur un kunst* (On the move: Monthly newspaper of literature and art) was published by the Jewish DPs in Rome between March 1947 and February 1949. Martina Ravagnan, “I campi Displaced Persons per profughi ebrei stranieri in Italia (1945-1950),” *Storia e Futuro* 30 (2012): 20-21.

revenge means that not only we live, but that we are creative. The Germans have not achieved their purpose. [...] We are creative, we create cultural works, even when we are on the move, even during a short stop, even in a cabin or in a shack on the way.³⁹

A cross-analysis of the DPs' press accounts and Aldouby's papers allows us to explore the tensions between the Jewish DPs' natural attitude to look at theater as an element of continuity with the past, and Aldouby's vision of theater as a medium that could help Jewish DPs build a new sense of belonging to Eretz Israel. From Aldouby's writings and notes on the organization of the school's exhibitions in Santa Maria al Bagno, redemption, heroism and sacrifice emerge as common themes, as was typical of Zionist pioneering repertoire. Through performance arts he showed his ability to elaborate these themes in a way that associated the heroic feats of Biblical figures and the pioneers' enterprises in the Land of Israel to the Jewish DPs' resistance and struggle for aliyah in the DP camps. Shavuot, for instance, was taught by Aldouby as the festival of reaping and first fruits but also as a "historical and national festivity," which celebrated the Jews' longed-for and painful journey to their homeland, where they could eventually become pioneers by cultivating the land, digging wells, and planting trees.⁴⁰

³⁹ This quote is from the article "From the Editorial Board" which appeared in the *In gang 1* in March 1947. The original document translated from Yiddish to Italian is quoted in Martina Ravagnan, "I profughi ebrei in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1950)," (MA diss., University of Bologna, 2011), 65. I thank Martina Ravagnan for giving me access to her unpublished MA dissertation.

⁴⁰ Shavuot Party Sketch – The Feast of the First Fruits, May 1947, File 162, ZAPA, [Hebrew].



Fig. 4. A drawing of a student in Santa Maria al Bagno school: next to a cultivated land, a kid plays with a dreidel (the four-sided spinning top, played during the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah), File 208, p. 16, ZAPA.

A few months later, during the Hanukkah celebrations organized in Santa Maria al Bagno to reunite the children of the four refugee camps in the province of Lecce, Aldouby decided to put on stage the Maccabean Revolt.⁴¹ In the short script he prepared—in part inspired by the opera “The Maccabees” by the Russian Anthon Rubinstein—he emphasized the audacity of Judah Maccabee and his army of Jewish dissidents in recapturing Jerusalem from Antiochus IV and equated such events with the Jewish DPs’ wish to redeem the land through aliyah. The Jewish DP children in charge of opening the lighting ceremony of the *hanukkiah* (nine-branched candelabrum lit during the eight-day holiday of Hanukkah) recited the following lines from Aldouby’s script:

⁴¹ The Jewish Agency for Eretz Israel – Welfare Unit from the Yishuv in Italy, December 25, 1946, File 131, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

We, the children of Israel, raise our national flag in honor of Hanukkah to celebrate our salvation thanks to the Maccabees. We, now Israeli refugees in refugee camps, turn our eyes and hearts to our brothers who are building Zion, fighting for the establishment of Israel and its redemption. From generation to generation, we commemorate our Maccabean ancestors who gave their lives in honor of Israel and its freedom. Few fought against many and won. May the Maccabean heroes be a model for us. Nothing in the world will prevent us from emigrating to Israel, where we will build and be rebuilt. We will not be silent and we will not stop until we can redeem our surviving land. With aliyah, work and defense there will be Israel, and it will be a free state.⁴²



Fig. 5. The Maccabees, File 208, 8, ZAPA.

⁴² The Maccabean Revolt, undated, File 166, ZAPA, [Hebrew].



Fig. 6. Hanukkah celebrations at Santa Maria al Bagno in December 1946, Photo 19/2, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

Theatrical plays—by school children, professional actors or amateurs who performed on stage for the first time in the DP camps—were massively attended by Jewish DPs. It also happened that some young DPs, such as Helga Freund, had the chance to enjoy theater only during their stay in Santa Maria al Bagno:

[...] there was the theater in Yiddish. We, the children, understood it because we spoke German at home, so it didn't take long to understand Yiddish. We also took part in the performances. They taught us to dance.

It was the first time I stepped on a stage. [...] There, for the first time, I heard about “The Dybbuk.” I remember that the plot aroused identification, enthusiasm and interest. Certainly, even today I can tell you that there were high standard performances. Absolutely top-notch! There were talented artists.⁴³

In fact, archival sources testify that the dramatic circles born out of the initiative of DPs in Italy mostly dramatized the most famous Yiddish plays, such as Sholem Aleichem’s *Tuvya the Milkman*, H. Leivick’s *The Golem*, and S. Ansky’s *The Dybbuk*.⁴⁴ For many of the Jewish DPs, these familiar Yiddish plays offered a sense of intimacy, reconnecting them with their past, and restoring their sense of home and family.⁴⁵

The revival of Yiddish theater in the DP camps was also possible thanks to the presence of many professional actors among the Jewish DPs. In Italy, there was the Polish actor Yonas Turkov, who for some time coordinated the dramatic circle in the Scuola Cadorna DP camp (near Milan) and was a member of the Union of Jewish Writers, Journalists and Artists. In an article which appeared in the *In Gang* magazine in 1947, Turkov confirmed that theater among the *She’erit Ha-Pletah* was a natural continuation of the interwar Jewish theatrical tradition.⁴⁶ Another interesting perspective is offered by Ella Florsheim’s study on Yiddish theater in

⁴³ Excerpt from Helga Freund’s testimonies, available online. Accessed March 31, 2022, <http://www.profughiebreinpuglia.unisalento.it/index.php/documents/biographies/132-helga-freund.html>.

⁴⁴ Contents: Country – Italy, February 18, 1947, Italy, General, 1946, NY AR194554/4/44/2/628, AJDC; Report for the Month of January 1947, March 15, 1947, Italy, Refugees 1947, NY AR194554/4/44/9/662, AJDC.

⁴⁵ The use of Yiddish in the DP camps is even more relevant in relation to the contemporary marginalization of Yiddish culture, which was perceived as the antithesis to the hegemonic pioneering Hebrew culture and was the target of outright attacks in the Yishuv. On the power dynamics between Hebrew and Yiddish at a time of nation building see: Benjamin Harshav, *Language in a Time of Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). For an overview on the emergence of the Yiddish literary and press production in the DP camps in Germany see: Lewinsky Tamar, “Dangling roots? Yiddish Language and Culture in the German Diaspora,” in *“We are here”: New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, eds. Avinoam Patt J. and Berkowitz Michael (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 308-334.

⁴⁶ This information is taken from the article “The theater among the Sherith Ha-Pletah” written by Yonas Turkov for the *In gang* in 1947. The original document translated from Yiddish to Italian is cited in Ravagnan “I profughi ebrei,” 75.

the DP camps in Germany. She argues that Jewish DPs' preference for the most celebrated Yiddish plays and playwrights reflected

[...] an attempt by the theater artists [in the DP camps] to anchor themselves in the familiar and universally shared motifs of yesteryear. This retrospective tendency found further expression in the fact that the theater of the She'erit Hapleta was almost completely absent any Zionist content despite the pronounced Zionist identity of the DPs themselves. In this context, too, preoccupation with their shared past superseded an unknown future.⁴⁷

As evidence of the picture depicted so far, at his arrival in Santa Maria al Bagno, Aldouby found the local DP dramatic circle “still stuck in the diaspora.”⁴⁸ As we shall see, this motivated him to trigger a lively political discussion both in the camps and within the Merkaz He-Halutz. Indeed, stimulating Jewish DPs' creativity and interest in the Jewish traditions and the pioneers' sacrifices to build Eretz Israel became crucial aspects in Aldouby's mission. During his stay in Italy, Aldouby focused on creating a vibrant cultural life by organizing concerts, lectures, dance performances, theater shows, and art exhibitions.⁴⁹ He saw the cultural activities in the camp as a way to provide a communal feeling of belonging, and to rebuild the sense of personal and collective humanity.⁵⁰ For these reasons, in his reports Aldouby asked the Merkaz He-Halutz and the Jewish Agency to

⁴⁷ Ella Florsheim, “Yiddish theater in the DP Camps,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 40, no. 2 (2012): 123.

⁴⁸ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 8, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁴⁹ Zvi Aldouby succeeded in extending and strengthening the cultural programs in Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp. He facilitated the establishment of a dance company for girls called Banot Ha'Emek (The Girls of the [Jezreel] Valley), led by the pianist Ella and the choreographer Leah Almuly. Aldouby also organized several exhibitions, among them that of Jewish DP painter Albert Alkal'ay and an exhibition on the Jewish National Fund. Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 9, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish]; Appreciation letter to Leah Almuly, undated, File 333, ZAPA, [Hebrew]; The Jewish Agency for Eretz Israel – Welfare Unit from the Yishuv in Italy, December 25, 1946, File 131, pp. 5-6, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁵⁰ See among the others: Reviews of the Haverim on what has been done, 6 May 1947, File 129, p. 6, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

send emissaries specifically qualified in the fields of music, dance, and especially theater.⁵¹

Recognizing the value of theater in supporting the refugees' rehabilitation and promoting a Zionist agenda, Aldouby formed a dramatic circle, naming it "Tkumah" (in Hebrew, Revival). This complex twofold aspect of theater as a social event, and as an educational and ideological tool, faced many challenges during Aldouby's mission. Is it possible to reconcile the tension between caring for the refugees' immediate needs while also promoting Zionist ideology to encourage aliyah? Grappling with this question in his journal, letters and reports, Aldouby turns to theater as a way to attend to both aspects of his mission in Italy.

Part II

The Tkumah Dramatic Circle

Aldouby recognized theater as both a form of social event that could temporarily alleviate Jewish DPs' harsh memories and long wait in the refugee camps, and as a powerful "channel" to advocate Zionist ideals. When Aldouby arrived in Santa Maria al Bagno, a local theater company, the Aufbau (in Yiddish, Construction), already existed. Many of its members were politically affiliated with the Jewish national movement opposing Zionism, namely the Bund,⁵² and the company mostly staged Yiddish dramas representing the Jewish *shtetl* or Yiddish romantic comedies.⁵³ For Aldouby, both the dramas and the comedies nostalgically

⁵¹ Theater scholarship extensively focused on the role of amateur troupes as social agents in times of crisis. For a preliminary discussion see: Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979); Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (London: Routledge, 1992); Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2005); James Thompson, *Applied Theatre Bewilderment and Beyond* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006).

⁵² The Bund (abbreviation of General Jewish Workers Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia) was a Jewish socialist party founded in Russia in 1897. The Bund's ideology supported the use of Yiddish, autonomy and secular Jewish nationalism. However, in sharp opposition to Zionism, the Bund envisaged a Jewish national project in Eastern Europe. For an overview see Jack Jacobs, *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

⁵³ The Aufbau's repertoire—defined by Aldouby "as old as Methuselah"—included *Der Get* (The

portrayed a Jewish world that no longer existed. He criticized this repertoire for holding onto old ideas that neither addressed nor reflected the sense of urgency in the precarious condition of European Jewry:

1946: Jews with numbers tattooed in their flesh, refugees from crematoria and death wagons, still stuck on the “Roman sandbar,” embarrassed with nowhere to go...[...] Ruins. Mass graves. Entire communities obliterated only yesterday, a fiery ever-turning sword on the crossroads.⁵⁴ A fateful struggle for the resurrection and rebuilding of the nation. Landmarks are needed. Where to? And those [people saying]: “Only not politics...” [...] And you, coming from the Land of Israel, be practical and do not corrupt your words on deaf ears, all common sense and the burden of proof will not be useful – and we have no time! [...] Shake up the rotting green algae on the stagnant water of the swamp and instead of “croaking frogs” you will hear the word of the Land of Israel in the camps.⁵⁵

According to Aldouby, then, theater in the camp should not recall a lost past but rather reconfigure a new way towards a Jewish future. It should present questions and invite the audience to reflect on their path in order to establish “landmarks” necessary to reach the place they wish to go to.⁵⁶

Less than a month after his arrival, Aldouby wrote a short play called *Le-‘Ezrat Ha-‘Am* (For the Help of the Nation) based on Bialik’s texts.⁵⁷ The play explored the concept of exile (*galut*) and redemption (*ge’ula*) and brought up the “Israeli-pioneering local color.”⁵⁸ Performing Zionist themes on stage caused tensions

Divorce) a Jewish romantic comedy by Shalom-Alichem, and “Rozhinkes mit Mandlen” (Raisins and Almonds), a poem by Abraham Goldfaden. Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 8, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁵⁴ This is a Biblical reference to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, see: *Genesis* 3:24.

⁵⁵ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 8, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁵⁶ In Hebrew, Zvi Aldouby uses the term “*tziunei derekh*” which can be translated as landmarks, signposts, milestones, road-marks. It carries a rich meaning as it references Jeremiah’s prophecy of Israel’s return from exile after the destruction of the First Temple. See *Jeremiah*, 31:21: “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, Virgin Israel, return to your towns.”

⁵⁷ Report (scrap of paper), July 28, 1946, File 310, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁵⁸ Draft of a letter to Chaim Epelboim, July 16, 1946, File 322, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

between members of the dramatic circle as well as with other DPs affiliated with the Bund. Due to these political conflicts, some of the talented actors of the Aufbau quit, and the dramatic circle fell apart.⁵⁹ However, shortly afterwards, Aldouby formed the Tkumah. To prevent future contrasts, Aldouby required all new company members to sign in advance a statement declaring that, as part of this new dramatic circle, they agreed that the Tkumah would pursue the official Zionist agenda, and would work and behave accordingly. This statement also specified that the members would work in a friendly and kind spirit, respect the time schedule of the performances, and make every effort to ensure the success of the group.⁶⁰

Aldouby chose Yiddish to be the language for Tkumah, prioritizing the refugees' ability to perform and comprehend the show in a familiar language. More precisely, the repertoire he selected for Tkumah consisted of plays that were performed in Hebrew by the Habima Theater Company, translated into Yiddish by himself. This was an unconventional decision, given the centrality of the Hebrew language in Zionist cultural activities among DPs. On the one hand, we assume that this was a practical choice based on a question of language proficiency: Yiddish was better known than Hebrew among Jewish DPs (as proved by their thriving publication of Yiddish newspapers and magazines). On the other, considering the specific role attributed by Aldouby to theater, we interpret the choice of Yiddish as an attempt to utilize this familiar language as a bridge rather than a barrier in the Jewish DPs' training for aliyah.

⁵⁹ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, pp. 8-9, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 10.



Fig. 7. Tkumah dramatic circle (Aldouby seats in the first row, the second from the left), 1946, Photo 3/1, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The Tkumah dramatic circle was active for a period of less than six months. Despite this short time, their performances are key to understanding Aldouby's political and ideological agenda among Jewish DPs, as well as the role of theater within the training programs for aliyah, and its educational paradigms. As documented by Aldouby, the company endured many ideological tensions, which ultimately resulted in two performances:⁶¹ *The Golem* by H. Leivick—a traditional play of the Yiddish theater that concerns the themes of Jewish persecution and redemption in Europe—and *This Land* by A. Ashman, written in the Yishuv in 1942, that addresses the challenges of aliyah. What is the significance of selecting these plays as Tkumah's repertoire? What was the impact of featuring them in this particular order? The analysis of these performances helps us understand the interplay between theater, ideology, and Jewish identity formation in DP camps.

Aldouby's journals offer insights surrounding the ideologies that prompted the selection and re-adaptation of these plays, underlining the need to rebuild Jewish DPs' sense of self. In one instance, Aldouby writes in his private journal of a conversation he had on his first night in the camp with one of the refugees, who

⁶¹ The work of the Emissary from Eretz Israel – The Dramatic Circle Tkumah and Presentation of Ha-Golem Directed by Zvi Aldouby undated, File 335, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

referred to himself as “an empty shell, ruins of men.”⁶² Therefore, “to transform this dust of man into a group of workers who shall go to the Land [of Israel]” became Aldouby’s mission.⁶³ In this sense, he saw the Jewish refugee as a sort of *golem*, a lifeless body that needs to rise from the ashes and be filled with spirit and only then can go to the promised land.⁶⁴ In this study, based on Aldouby’s notes about the productions, the textual adaptation, the stage design and the reception among the Jewish DPs, we uncover the impact of theater not only as a leisure activity but as a new form of *hachsharah*, aimed at rebuilding the “figure of the Jew” first, as the necessary preliminary step to shape the “Zionist Jew,” in both body and mind. Drawing on the repertoire of the Habima Theater Company,⁶⁵ Aldouby uses *The Golem* and *This Land* to raise pressing questions surrounding Jewish redemption, offering aliyah as a political solution for Jewish life after the Holocaust.

The Golem and the Question of Jewish Redemption

Tkumah performed *The Golem* for the first time at Santa Maria al Bagno in November 1946.⁶⁶ The premiere, according to Aldouby, was a big success:

⁶² Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 3, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁶³ Activities in Hachsharot Ha-’Oved and Kibbutzim, undated, File 320, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁶⁴ The word “golem” originated in the Bible, in *Psalms*, 139:16 (“Your eyes saw my unformed substance [...]”), referring to an embryonic or incomplete substance, connoting an unfinished human made of raw material. In modern Hebrew, the word is used with the meaning of “dumb” or “helpless.” Correlating with the trope of the golem figure, the word is also used as a metaphor for a mindless entity who serves a master without thought. In this paper we use the spelling “the Golem” for the tale’s name, *The Golem* for the play’s title and “the golem” to refer to the character.

⁶⁵ The Habima Theater Company was formed in Moscow in 1917 as a professional Hebrew theater, and forms now the National Theater of Israel. Habima was known for its dedication to Hebrew and the Zionist cause, and famously toured with *The Golem* around Europe, Palestine, and America. For further reading see: Shelly Zer-Zion, *Habima in Berlin: The Institutionalization of a Zionist Theatre* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015).

⁶⁶ In 1946, *The Golem* was performed three times in Santa Maria al Bagno (September 29, October 2, and November 25). After this success the group toured the nearby DP camps in southern Italy—Santa Maria di Leuca (December 6 and 7), Santa Cesarea (December 19), and Tricase—and was permitted to perform in the camps and hachsharot in the Rome area and in northern Italy. Ha-Golem, undated, File 195, ZAPA, [Hebrew]; Notebook 2, October-December 1946, File 202, p. 18,

The Golem premiered in the camp! A big audience arrived. The show ran for 3 hours, outside in the cold it started to drizzle but the audience asked to continue. I was surprised by the enthusiastic acting of the group and by the wonderful reaction of the crowd.⁶⁷



Fig. 8. The creation of the Golem, 1946, Photo 5/1, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The Golem by H. Leivick (1888-1962) was published in 1921 in Yiddish as a dramatic poem in eight scenes, and was first performed by the Habima Theater Company in 1925. In *The Golem*, Leivick turned to mystical and messianic themes to criticize the Russian revolution, condemning the use of violence while underscoring the catastrophic dimensions of messianism.⁶⁸ Famously, the play draws on the European-based tale of the Golem and its creation by Judah Loew

ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish]; Personal journal 1946-1947, 1 January 1947, File 293, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁶⁷ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 14, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁶⁸ H. Leivick—pen name of Leivick Halpern (1888-1962)—was a Yiddish writer who fled from Russia to the United States.

Ben Bezalel, the late sixteenth-century Rabbi of Prague, also known as Maharal.⁶⁹ According to the legend, Maharal created the golem from clay (or mud in some versions) to protect the Jewish community from violence caused by the blood libel. The golem, whose name was Yosel, was brought to life through the power of the Hebrew letters of God's holy name (*hashem*).⁷⁰ Every Friday evening, Maharal would take God's holy name out of the golem, turning it back into raw clay for the Shabbat, and providing him with spirit again on Sunday morning. One Friday, however, Maharal forgets to remove God's holy name and the golem transforms into a destroyer, turning against the Jewish community he was designed to protect. After hearing what the golem had done, Maharal disabled his servant and stored his remains in the synagogue's attic, forbidding anyone but his successors to enter. He kept the clay in case he would need to recreate the golem once again.

Tkumah's performance of *The Golem* was inspired by Habima's version of Leivick's iteration of the nineteenth-century folktale.⁷¹ In the play, Maharal creates a powerful golem-redeemer to protect the Jewish community from Tadiush, a priest that persecuted the Jews. The golem follows Maharal's orders to protect the community from the blood libel Tadiush fabricated. After completing his mission, the golem disturbs the Rabbi by always seeking his company. In his misery, the golem locks the Rabbi in the attic and turns against the Jewish community, who, in his view, takes the Rabbi's attention away from him. Witnessing this tragedy, the Rabbi removes the letters of God's holy name from the golem, transforming him back into a piece of clay to protect his people. In this post-World War I text, as Maya Barzilai suggests, the golem represented a figure of both protection and violence, while its aggression "was also associated with the (failed) promise of messianic deliverance."⁷² Indeed, the figure of the golem oscillates between notions of redemption and destruction, opening in the DP

⁶⁹ An acronym of his name in Hebrew: Our Great Rabbi Loew.

⁷⁰ For an overview of the versions and revisions of the Golem story see: Maya Barzilai, *Golem: Modern Wars and their Monsters* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 5-21.

⁷¹ The Golem's tale has many versions, as well as adaptations into literature, theater, and film. Habima's version of the play changed the golem's name from Yosel to Yehudah, a name that signifies strength and power in Jewish tradition. Interestingly, Yehudah is also Maharal's name, therefore the golem can also be seen as the rabbi's alter-ego.

⁷² Barzilai, *Golem*, 6.

campus a space for the ideological debates surrounding the so-called “Jewish question” after the Holocaust.⁷³

The ideological debate concerning Jewish futurity appears most explicitly at the end of the play, which differs significantly from Leivick’s dramatic poem. As Atay Zitron has shown, Habima’s version of the play follows the poem’s basic plot, but revises the text to fit Zionist ideology concerning redemption through action.⁷⁴ In both versions, Maharal kills the golem, by turning him back to clay. But whereas Leivick’s play ends with the Jewish community returning to the synagogue and reestablishing their Jewish tradition, Habima’s version (and Tkumah’s performance) omits this scene, replacing it with a concluding question: “who will be our saviour?”⁷⁵ This final chord at the end of the play compelled the audience to reflect on their Jewish futurity, implicitly placing Zionism and aliyah as the movement providing a solution for Jewish homelessness.

Habima changed the ending as a means of challenging a Jewish return to tradition, and, as Yair Lipshitz shows, to pave the path towards the figure and body of “the new Jew,” actively seeking self-redemption.⁷⁶ Rather than a return to the synagogue—and to the old Jewish tradition—the play raises the question of Jewish futurity without providing an answer, ending on an anti-cathartic note, leaving Jewish DPs to reflect on their political state.

⁷³ The adaptation of Habima’s 1925 performance of Leivick’s play *The Golem* was broadcast on the Israeli national radio during the Jewish New Year holiday in September 1961, a few weeks after the Eichmann Trial. For a discussion see Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices*, 81-121. The radio adaptation is available online. Accessed March 23, 2022, <https://www.ruthieabeliovich.com/possessed-voices>.

⁷⁴ Atay Zitron, “Habima’s ‘The Golem,’” *The Drama Review. Jewish Theater Issue* 24, no.3 (1980): 59-68.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 68.

⁷⁶ Yair Lipshitz, “Redemption Depicted in Flesh: Past, Future, and the Work of the Actor in Habima’s Performance of HaGolem,” *Reshit* 1 (2009): 279-304, [Hebrew]. Lipshitz’s notion of “the new Jew” is not yet the Hebrew *tzabar* (native Eretz Israel Jew) but an explicit call for change and a reconfiguration of the European Jew as a figure that actively seeks ways of survival and self-redemption. The figure of the *tzabar* arised in the Yishuv in the 1930s and is typically attributed to Uri Kaiser, who published an article in the newspaper *Doar hayom* (Post Today) titled “We are the Tzabar Leaves!” During the 1930s and 1940s the term evolved in both literature and art, reaching its peak with the protagonist of Moshe Shamir’s *Hu halach basadot* (*He Walked in the Fields*, 1947), followed by the caricature illustrations of the fictional Srulik in the 1950s. On the evolution of the notion of *tzabar* see: Dan Urian, “Zionism in the Israeli Theatre,” *Israel Affairs* 8, no. 1-2 (2001): 43-55.

The question at the play's end echoes the tension between action and inaction that appears as a thread throughout the play. In his dramaturgical notes, Aldouby reflects on the ideological significance of *The Golem*, focusing on the golem's dual image as both redeemer and destroyer. After listing the relevant scenes on the golem's creation, existence, and horrific actions towards the Jewish community, Aldouby writes:

Is there redemption in the world?
 If so, how? (physical strength or not?)



Fig. 9. *The Golem*, 1946, Photo 6/1, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The fraught relationship Aldouby identifies between protector and destroyer emerges not only through the figure of the golem but also through the competing worldviews of Tanchum and Maharal concerning redemption. As we will show, Maharal represents the use of physical strength as a way to actively achieve redemption, whereas Tanchum—a figure between a simpleton and a madman, who has lost his family, and predicts an impending catastrophe—advocates for

redemption via inaction. In his notes, Aldouby compares Maharal with Rabbi Akiva—a spiritual leader and influential Torah commentator who was known to support the Bar Kokhba rebellion in 132 CE.⁷⁷ Understanding Maharal through the figure of Rabbi Akiva, highlights Maharal's role as a leader with both physical and spiritual strength. Whereas Bar Kokhba's rebellion represents physical strength and the ability to actively protect the people, Jewish literature attributes to Rabbi Akiva divine knowledge and the ability to see beyond the physical world.⁷⁸ In this sense, Maharal expresses both aspects of the protection of the Jewish people: through the physical strength of the golem, and his spiritual ability to create a human-like figure from clay. Maharal, then, represents a mode of redemption through action.

⁷⁷ Sixty years after the Kanna'im's (Zealots) revolt against the Romans that led to the destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE), Shimon Bar Kusba started another major revolt, giving hope of freedom to the Jews of Judea. Rabbi Akiva, a leading rabbi at that time, appreciated Bar Kusba and gave him the name "Bar Kochva" (son of star), recognizing him as the Messiah. But two years later the rebellion ceased and Judea was destroyed. From that time onward, Bar Kochva is depicted in Jewish literature as a complex figure: a symbolic hero fighting for independence and a warrior who used physical strength with fatal consequences. Zionism evoked Bar Kochva's figure, as well as the Maccabees, to shape a new Jewish generation that would strive to defend their Land and aspire to freedom. See: Hanan Eshel, "The Bar Kochba Revolt, 132-135," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, volume 4, The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, eds William David Davies, Louis Finkelstein, and Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105-127; 105. It is interesting to note that the majority of Jewish writings at the time were written in Yavne, a village that became the Jewish people's spiritual and political center after Jerusalem's destruction. The city of Yavne was established with precisely this purpose by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, who opposed the rebellion and fled from Jerusalem to Yavne before the siege. As a result, in Jewish culture Yavne became associated with non-violent resistance, while Bar Kochba, together with the Makabbees, with the use of physical power to gain independence. This clearly cultural-philosophical view is evident in a letter from Zvi's brother—Moshe, who responded to Zvi's description of *The Golem's* production: "you have preserved the Hasmoneans [the Maccabees' dynasty] and Yavne legacy in one," see Letter from Moshe Aldouby, November 10, 1947, File 737, ZAPA, [Hebrew]. For an analysis of the Bar Kokhba revolt in relation to the Zionist reconstruction of Jewish history see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago - London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁷⁸ Rabbi Akiva is a powerful figure in Jewish tradition. In a famous story in the Babylonian Talmud, "The four who entered the orchard" (Hagigah 14B), Rabbi Akiva is the only one who came out with his body and soul unimpaired. The orchard in Jewish mysticism is understood to be a place where one interacts directly with God. That episode marked Rabbi Akiva as a spiritual figure, a man who had influence over both the people in the land and the divine in heaven. With that understanding of Rabbi Akiva, the similarity that Aldouby found between Rabbi Akiva and Maharal (who acts mostly in order to achieve physical redemption) became even more complex.

In contrast to Maharal, who actively protects the community and creates the golem, Tanchum represents passivity, someone who suffers greatly and awaits external redemption. At the same time, Tanchum is associated with the characters Messiah and the prophet Elijah, who, in Jewish tradition, symbolizes the spiritual redemption that one day will come.⁷⁹ Tanchum, then, represents a mode of redemption through inaction.

In between action and inaction stands the golem—a shell of a strong human body emphasizing basic needs and instincts: sleep, food, and love, capable of both protecting and harming. As Aldouby noted, the golem undergoes a transformation, going from being entirely dependent on the Maharal to becoming unconstrained.⁸⁰ His sovereignty turns into a threat to the Jewish community, resulting in him killing those he was made to protect. Tanchum’s question, then, confronts the difficult role of physical strength in redemption, and the impossibility of a Jewish redemption in the diaspora.

⁷⁹ *Malachi*, 3:23. This is the source of many traditions connecting Elijah and the Messiah, including leaving an open door for Elijah as part of the Passover Seder and a famous Ashkenazi Piyut (song-prayer) for Saturday night expressing the hope that Elijah will come with the Messiah: “Elijah the prophet [...] He will soon come to us with the Messiah – the son of David.” Whereas the figure of Messiah Ben-David represents spiritual redemption, physical redemption is attributed to Messiah Ben-Yosef. Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From Its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). Aldouby was Klausner’s student at the Hebrew University in the 1930s. It is tempting to find an influence of the class he attended in his theatrical work.

⁸⁰ Ha-Golem, undated, File 195, ZAPA, [Hebrew].



Fig. 10. Tanchum and Maharal, 1946, Photo 8/2, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.



Fig. 11. An actor of the Tkumah (Mr. M. Zinger) in the role of Tanchum asking “Who will be our saviour?” (hand-written in Yiddish at the bottom of the photo), 1946, Photo 4/3, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

The question of redemption was amplified through the stage design of the performance. Despite the restrictions imposed by the conditions in the camp, Aldouby and the group created a stage design of a high aesthetic standard.⁸¹ A cubist-like painting decorated the set depicting an old Jewish community in an old *shtetl*, giving the illusion of a real place while also making it seem surreal. Inspired by Habima's production, the actors wore artistic make-up suggesting a dream-like state of archetypal characters.⁸² The impact of this stage design is twofold. First, it represents the old Jewish world: in this sense Aldouby continues the "Aufbau" approach in representing a world that no longer exists, evoking traditions and nostalgia. At the same time, the surreal painting and the exaggerated makeup, which looks almost like a mask, undermine sentiments of identification and representation, creating an experience of estrangement from the world shown on the stage. Using the stage design to convey these contradictory sentiments, the visual experience intensified the inquiry into the future of European Jewry, as well as Tanchum's crucial question: who shall be our saviour?

⁸¹ We were not able to establish if Tkumah's actors had any knowledge of Habima's shows in Palestine, thus we assume that it was Aldouby who suggested the idea of using the stage design to recall the contemporary performance of *The Golem* by Habima. We base this assumption on Aldouby's personal journals, in which he mentions his instructions for creating the stage design. Personal journal – 1946-1947, December 1946, File 293, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁸² On the stage design of Habima's production of *The Golem* see: Citron, "Habima's 'The Golem'," 61.



Fig. 12. The Golem in Tkumah production, 1946, Photo 4/2, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.



Fig. 13. The Golem in Habima Production, photographed by Nini and Carry Hess. Courtesy of the Habima Theater Archive, Tel Aviv.

Thus, through the story and the characters' actions, the specific ending and the stage setting, the play serves two major goals: first, to provide a shared experience of grief for those who had gone through such horror, by creating a space for communal mourning. Second, to bring attention to Jewish refugees' problematic situation and encourage them to reconsider their beliefs and chances. Through the play, Aldouby aimed to empower Jewish refugees to take ownership of their lives after the horrors they had endured in the Holocaust.

In his notes, Aldouby notes the enthusiastic response from the audience, concluding: "It must be that *The Golem* conveys the profound pain felt by those who drank the poisoned cup till its last drop."⁸³ Menahen Riger—director of the Artistic Ensemble—described the play's similarity with the refugees' situation, and how it led the audience to ask themselves hard question and find an answer:

Some people are saying The Golem play is too difficult for a Jew who just left a concentration camp. However, this is not true. After watching the play twice, I saw how enthusiastically it was received by the general public. It was an awakening of consciousness [...]. The tension of the audience grows step by step while the "golem" gradually rises to become the Redeemer [...] At times, The Golem recalls in our memory the legend of Messiah Ben-Yosef, who will come before Messiah Ben-David⁸⁴ [...]. When the golem is being put down, when Tanchum "The Lord of Ruins," who carries in his distant heart the anxiety, the anguish of Israel and the sorrow of the world, shouts: "Who will save us?!" you can imagine the ghetto in flames; the threatened downfall... and on this call – an answer must come.⁸⁵

For Aldouby, *The Golem* encapsulates the Jewish condition of being persecuted and needing an external source of redemption. The golem's violent outrage, paired with Tanchum's concluding question signal the failure of this model, paving the path to the Zionist option of self-redemption through action via aliyah. In

⁸³ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 14, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁸⁴ About the difference between Messiah Ben-Yosef and Messiah Ben-David see footnote 79.

⁸⁵ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 14, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

Aldouby's words, Tanchum in *The Golem* raises the question of redemption, "and the answer was given in *This Land* by A. Ashman."⁸⁶

"A Taste of Israel": *This Land* and the Journey Toward Independence

Theater, as a tool to prepare the DPs for aliyah and life in Eretz Israel, served to convey not only knowledge and ideas about the land, but also, as Aldouby described it, "the taste of Israel."⁸⁷ Tkumah performed Aharon Ashman's play *This Land* for the first time on December 27, 1946.⁸⁸ *This Land* tells the story of Jewish settlers in Yirkaya, a fictional place, portraying the difficulties faced by Jewish settlers in Palestine during the late nineteenth-century. A mainstay of Habima's repertoire during the 1940s, *This Land* was first staged by Habima on September 19th, 1942 and quickly became a hit, performed 213 times and brought on tour all over the region. As Ben Ami Feingold demonstrates, *This Land* is a foundational social-cultural event for the consolidation of the Yishuv, underscoring the shared values and loss among the settlers.⁸⁹

For Aldouby, this play provided an opportunity to grapple with Zionist ideology while also introducing the DPs to the contemporary socio-cultural debates taking place in Palestine. The play was translated from Hebrew into Yiddish and was adapted to fit the circumstances and conditions of the camp environment. Rather than performing the entire play, the performance focused on the doubts around the digging of the well in Eretz Israel and the joy of finding water.⁹⁰ In his journal, Aldouby reports:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Letter to Menachem, November 26, 1946, File 323, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

⁸⁸ Personal journal 1946-1947, File 293, ZAPA, [Hebrew]. *This Land* was first staged by Habima on September 19, 1942 and quickly became a hit, performed 213 times and brought on tour all over the region.

⁸⁹ Directed by Baruch Chemrinsky, the initial performance was staged in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the city of Hadera, which took place against the backdrop of the bloody battles of World War II. For further reading on the performance of *This Land* and its socio-political significance in the Yishuv see: Ben-Ami Feingold, "Theater and Struggle: Hadera and 'This Land'," *Cathedra: On the History of Eretz Israel and the Yishuv* 74 (1994): 140-156, [Hebrew].

⁹⁰ A letter to Meir (Schwarz), December 28, 1946, File 326, ZAPA, [Hebrew]; Letter to Shoshana (Aldouby's sister), December 8, 1946, File 308, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

We performed *This Land* tonight for the first time. The audience's response during the show and afterwards conveyed a longing for redemption and the love for the land – “s'iz dokh mamesh vi in Erets Isroel” [Yiddish] (this is exactly like in Eretz Israel), lips expressed here and there. One can, then, “entertain” the hearts of the people in the camps not only with Jazz and ‘Kuni Lemel’ but also through a distinct dream-like educational play.⁹¹



Fig. 14. Tkumah performing *This Land* during Hanukkah celebration, 1946, Photo 34/1, Aldouby's Private Collection, Jerusalem.

Aldouby's goal was to bring a piece of Eretz Israel to the DP camps. By staging *This Land*, Tkumah featured an image of Eretz Israel that was both appealing and complex, using it, as we shall see, to introduce Zionist values and train the DPs for aliyah in a threefold manner: first, performing on stage the digging of the well resonated with the core of the program developed by the emissaries of the He-Halutz in refugee camps and the hachsharot to familiarize Jewish DPs with agriculture and manual labor. Second, the play exhibits conflicting worldviews and contemporary debates among the settlers, offering Jewish DPs an honest

⁹¹ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 15, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

representation of the challenges concerning aliyah. In this sense, the performance depicted Eretz Israel as a non-Utopia while empowering the pioneers' forceful act of self-redemption. Finally, the stage design, costumes, and music created a lively representation of Eretz Israel, inviting the audience to step into the experience of developing the land.

Drawing on real-life events surrounding poverty and illness, the play depicts the story of a group of settlers, and centers on the fictional Yoshfe family - the father, Yoel, his wife, Esther, their son, Pinkhas and Chana, their orphan nephew whom they adopted. Yoel serves as the leader of a group of settlers, who exhibit diverse ideological viewpoints concerning life in Eretz Israel. Aldouby describes three major difficulties that are represented in the play: illness and lack of water, frictions with the local Turkish authorities, and, importantly, the ongoing tensions and differences between Yoel and his son Pinkhas, which have colliding worldviews concerning aliyah.⁹² Whereas the father is committed to making the land blossom, the son represents the intellectual, diasporic Jew: he criticizes his parents' choice of lifestyle and longs to return to Europe, where they had food, water, and other basic necessities of life. The tension between those two modes of life is reflected also in Pinkhas's romantic relationship. Pinkhas wishes to marry his relative, Chana, whose heart is set on both the land and Yaakov, a Jewish pioneer who works in the fields and the one who triumphs over the difficulties of drawing water from the well. In contrast to Pinkhas, Yaakov's character exhibits both mental and physical strength and embodies an early version of the *tzabar* (the Eretz Israel born Jew), who is committed to developing the land.⁹³

Drawing on Aldouby's archival materials, Tkumah performed only the first act, with the well scene. In the second and third acts, Ashman's play illustrates the troubles the settlers had with local authorities. The drama escalates as Pinkhas turns his back on the community and collaborates with the greedy real estate agent in preventing the group from getting a license for their new settlement. Pinkhas then becomes severely ill, and on his deathbed disavows his previous behavior and pledges his loyalty to the settlers, while making Chana promise that she will never marry someone else. In the third act - the final scene of the play - we meet Chana

⁹² Notes on *This Land* premier, December 29, 1946, File 483, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish].

⁹³ As the play's plot takes place circa 1890s, Yaakov is not considered a *tzabar*. He is, however, an early reincarnation of this trope, which is part of Ashman's 1942 audience socio-cultural life.

fifty years later, a lonely woman that has kept her promise and has not married. She is sitting near the graveyard and concludes the story: "... and so life had passed, fifty long years, in sorrow and loneliness..., but it was worth dying as you died, and worth living as I lived..., it was all worth it."⁹⁴

Rooted in Eretz Israel, the play provided Aldouby with the possibility of moving from a repertoire based on the Jewish diaspora to a performance that conveyed Zionist values. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hebrew literature set forth a Utopian view of Zion, Ashman's play pioneered an honest representation of the settlers' lived experience and everyday struggle.⁹⁵ Presenting a non-Utopian image of Palestine, the play also evokes Biblical symbols and references. Through this kind of Biblical inter-textuality, Ashman's play claims a mythical-historical Jewish feeling of belonging to the land, situating the modern Hebrew text as a bridge between past and present. As Anita Shapira suggests in her seminal work about the Bible in the making of Israeli identities:

[t]he Bible endowed the young Jewish nationalism with a mythological-historical foundation to consolidate its distinctiveness around its ancestral land, serving as evidence of the "naturalness" of the Zionist solution to the Jewish problem [...] as opposed to the traditional Jewish outlook, which posits a linear historical progress toward redemption, Zionism offered a cyclical view of the drama of sovereignty, destruction, and redemption.⁹⁶

In the Zionist imagination, then, aliyah is not a way of starting anew but rather a manifestation of a Jewish return to the land of the forefathers.⁹⁷ In this sense, while

⁹⁴ Aaron Ashman, "Ha-Adama Ha-Zot," *Mahazot 2* (Tel Aviv: Yesod, 1973), 7-54; 53-54.

⁹⁵ The first Hebrew novel, *Ahavat Zion*, written by Avraham Mapu depicts Jewish life in Jerusalem. Drawing on Biblical figures, the novel imagines a Utopian romance between Amnon and Tamar, transforming the horrific Biblical story of a brother raping his sister into a romantic love affair in which Amnon and Tamar are children of two different families that are destined to be together. Overcoming the evil forces dominating Jerusalem, they ultimately unite and build a kosher Jewish home in Jerusalem, and do so in Hebrew. For further reading on *Ahavat Zion* as a Utopian genre see: Yigal Schwartz, *The Zionist Paradix: Hebrew Literature and Israeli Identity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

⁹⁶ Anita Shapira, "The Bible and Israeli Identity," *AJS Review* 28, no. 1 (2004): 11-41; 13.

⁹⁷ This idea is also conveyed by the name Aldouby gave to the dramatic circle: Tkumah, meaning "revival," in contrast to Aufbau, which means "construction."

through the production of *The Golem* Aldouby addressed the notion of redemption from the perspective of Jewish persecution and mystical protection, *This Land* situated aliyah as a mode of agency and self-redemption using Biblical symbols, imagery and inter-textual references. These references appear throughout the play, and are interwoven in Ashman's dramatic language, stage directions, and imagery.

The play begins at dawn with three men on stage digging a well. The archetypal act of digging a well evokes the Biblical image of the wells owned by the forefathers, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov. In turn, each of the forefathers engaged in the search for water, and put down roots in Eretz Israel by digging a well. For that reason, Avraham names the first city he inhabits Be'er Sheva, underlining the importance of a well by putting the word Be'er (well) in its name.⁹⁸ The well as a symbol of a source of life continues to echo for both Yitzhak and Yaakov, who return to Avraham's wells to mark their rootedness. For Yaakov, the land's inability to nurture life led him to leave Canaan and go to Egypt, an act which resulted in the slavery of the Israelites. On his journey, he stops by Avraham's well in Be'er Sheva and there he receives a promise from God that his children will return to the land.⁹⁹ The well, then, appears in the Biblical narrative as a symbol for roots and nourishment, marking the coordinates of home.

Another way through which the play evokes prominent Biblical figures is through the use of names. For example, the names of the workers who dig the well are: Yaakov, Ezekiel and Daniel. While the name Yaakov refers to the ancestor who dipped into the wells that his forefathers dug with great effort when they settled in the Land of Israel (Canaan), Ezekiel and Daniel are the names of biblical figures who predicted the future redemption during the Babylonian exile after the first temple's destruction (586 BCE). Together, the names represent both the longing for the land and living in it.

As the digging of the well in the play progresses, Israel, a member of the settlers' group, passes by the digging crew on his way to the morning prayer.¹⁰⁰ Seeing the

⁹⁸ Biblical reference to *Genesis*, 21:30-31.

⁹⁹ Biblical reference to *Genesis*, 41:1.

¹⁰⁰ The name Israel was given to Yaakov by an angel after he fought with him, Biblical reference to *Genesis*, 32:23-31. In this way, Yaakov and Israel are completing one another: while Yaakov works to find water (physical redemption) Israel prays and prepares a place for a new Torah scroll (spiritual redemption).

workers struggling to dig, he tries to inspire them by reminding them of Avraham, the first ancestor who came to the land and struggled to dig wells but, after him, his children enjoyed the fruits of his labor. Israel quotes from the covenant between Avraham and God who promises: “I will assign this land to your offspring,”¹⁰¹ emphasizing that the land was promised not only to Avraham but also to his future descendants. Through this figurative language and imagery, the performance linked the Israelite descendants with the Jewish DPs in the camp, offering the possibility of a shared future that is based on a mythical-historical past. After speaking of the ancestors, Israel also mentions a Torah that was saved from a fire during a pogrom, and that will soon be given back to the community.¹⁰² A strong similarity can be established between the Torah scroll that survived a pogrom and finding a new home in the Land of Israel. Later in that scene, an argument between Pinkas and his father evokes a biblical reference from Exodus. In this exchange, Pinkhas expresses his unhappiness with life in Eretz Israel, and the sacrifices it demands. He emphasizes the difficulty of living in substandard conditions when they can live wherever they want. In response, his father stresses the importance of having roots and doing things that benefit the community as a whole. Amidst their argument Pinkhas cites a verse from Exodus, where the Israelites blame Moses for leading them toward death:

Pinkas: My world is big and wide, and not all of its gates are locked!

Yoel: The world may be big and wide, but people still need roots [...]

Pinkhas: You are bringing malaria and fever upon us! [...] “Was it for want of graves that you brought us to die in the wilderness?” [...].¹⁰³

Pinkhas uses this inter-textual reference to criticize the new form of Jewish life, which prefers bodily strength over intellectual study. Yoel, however, responds by referencing the same Biblical tale to emphasize the bravery the Israelites demonstrated in crossing the Red Sea, pursuing their journey from slavery to freedom in the promised land:

¹⁰¹ Biblical reference to *Genesis*, 12:7.

¹⁰² Ashman did not refer to a specific pogrom, but rather to an archetypal event.

¹⁰³ Biblical reference to *Exodus* 14:11. Script of “This Land,” undated, File 294, p. 3, ZAPA, [Yiddish].

Yoel: If the Israelites had to wait for someone to come to build a bridge when they arrived at the red sea they would have stuck there till this very day!

Pinkhas: It was the Jews' brain that gave them power over generations! The brain was the Jewish people weapon!

Yoel: We did not give up on this power [...] snake! Spies!!¹⁰⁴

In response to Pinkhas' doubt in their mission to rebuild the land, Yoel calls him a "spy"—referencing the tale of the twelve spies sent by Moses to explore Canaan.¹⁰⁵ In their report to Moses, the spies were enraged by the difficulties they faced in Israel and "spread calumnies" among the Israelites about the land they had scouted.¹⁰⁶ As a result of this sin, the Israelites must suffer forty years wandering in the desert.¹⁰⁷

Circling back to Anita Shapira's claim about Biblical references, these two prominent moments in the play create a link between the historical and mythical land of the ancestors and the Israelites, and the contemporary notion of aliyah. Eretz Israel constitutes the promise of return, and the home that holds a shared Jewish past and the hope of building a collective future. One major theme that draws on the images of the ancestors' wells and the Israelites' biblical journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Land of Israel, is the transition from a miraculous existence in the wilderness to a life of independence in the Land of Israel. In the desert the Israelites drank water from a magical well and ate food provided by god (*manna*), but in the Land of Israel everything is based on their labor and hard work. Therefore, in the DP camps' reality, leaving Europe and going to Israel is maybe an uncomfortable step, but is a necessary one toward

¹⁰⁴ Script of "This Land," undated, File 294, p. 6, ZAPA, [Yiddish].

¹⁰⁵ This biblical episode, which is found in *Numbers* 13-14, tells about Moses sending twelve spies (each one representing a tribe of Israel) to scout out the Land of Canaan. After forty days of reconnaissance, they came back to the Israelites, who were camped in the desert, and brought back frightening reports about the Promised Land, except for Joshua and Caleb who described it as the land "that flows with milk and honey." In response to their unwillingness to enter the land, God punished Israel by making them wander in the desert until a new generation would be born.

¹⁰⁶ *Numbers*, 13:32.

¹⁰⁷ Script of "This Land," undated, File 294, p. 29, ZAPA, [Yiddish].

independence. In that regard, in contrast to *The Golem*, in which the community is dependent on a miraculous servant with no past, in *This Land* the people of the community, connected to their heritage and roots, are the ones that dig their own well through hard work without the help of any miracles. Furthermore, while the golem fails to bring redemption through individual effort, in *This Land* success arises from teamwork and redemption involves the entire community. As mentioned in Aldouby's comments on the play, the final scene depicting "the joy of finding water" emphasizes the power of the community: "A call comes from the well: "water" and Yaakov is being pulled up with a pot filled with fresh water. The entire community rejoices and dances along with choreography inspired by the dances of Israel."¹⁰⁸

Using this aesthetic, the space of the theater becomes the space of the land, bringing the land to the people. This technique appears right in the opening scene of the digging of the well, that begins with a melancholic and romantic atmosphere underlined by sound effects and lights: "[...] Melancholy music and longing songs of night guards. Pealing bells of a camel caravan, work knocks and a mysterious shade from a red light [...]."¹⁰⁹ Aldouby also included in the show music and dances popular in the Yishuv, expanding the experience of Eretz Israel to include contemporary cultural features from the Tel Aviv of the 1940s. The performance staged Eretz Israel for the Jewish DPs and invited them to step into "this land," while also depicting the challenges this land entails.

Echoing the DPs' concerns surrounding this new form of life, *This Land* offers a political answer to Tanchum's concerns about Jewish persecution portrayed in *The Golem*, reconfiguring redemption as a source of inward strength. In other words, the savior is not the land as such, but the people who build it.

¹⁰⁸ Script of "This Land," undated, File 294, pp. 21-23, ZAPA, [Yiddish and Hebrew].

¹⁰⁹ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 15, ZAPA, [Yiddish and Hebrew].



Fig. 15. The dance company “Banot Ha-Emek” performing “Mayim Mayim” (Water Water), a popular Israeli folk dance adapted by Aldouby to emphasize the act of drawing water as the girls hold decorative pots mimicking the action. In the background a painting of Eretz Israel, 1946, Photo 29/1, Aldouby’s Private Collection, Jerusalem.

Conclusion

This Land was performed twice at Santa Maria al Bagno and was scheduled to tour other camps. In Aldouby’s view, this play would have been the first of a series of plays from the Hebrew theater that he wished to perform as a way to educate DPs about pioneering life and Zionism.¹¹⁰ By the end of 1946, however, UNRRA announced that the four camps in Lecce province, including Santa Maria al Bagno, would be shut down in view of the planned reduction of the refugee camps in the country. As reported by the JDC, the news of the transfer to other refugee camps

¹¹⁰ Aldouby asked his brother to send him more material from the Hebrew theater repertoire (such as: *Habima*, *Ohel* and *HaMatate*), as well as musical scores of songs and dance melodies. In another letter to his sister, he asked specifically for two of Ashman’s plays: *Ha-Choma* (The Wall)—about rebuilding Jerusalem walls during the period of *Shivat Zion*, and *Menachem Mendel*. Letter to Menachem, 26 November 1946, File 323, ZAPA, [Hebrew]; Letter to Shoshana, 8 December 1946, File 308, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

plunged the Jewish DPs in an atmosphere of tension and general disappointment.¹¹¹ Camp activities ceased only in January 1947, even if “Mr. Aldouby of Di Bagni conducted classes right up to the end of February, when the school was forced to close, since all children had been transferred.”¹¹²

In a letter to his brother, Aldouby described the DPs evacuation from Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp and the consequent dissolution of the Tkumah dramatic circle as a “miniature exile”¹¹³. His attempt to keep the group together through a collective transfer northward failed, since many members decided to join the Aufbau hachsharah associated with the Bund, located in a villa in Rome.¹¹⁴

With the dissolution of the Santa Maria al Bagno DP camp, Aldouby started working in the Education Department of the He-Halutz, to which he tirelessly emphasized the importance of culture and art in the Jewish DPs’ educational training for aliyah. Before resigning his post in February 1948, he spent a few months in the Scuola Cadorna DP Camp (near Milan), where he established a school as well as a new dramatic circle, naming it Tkumah, that performed, yet again, *This Land*.¹¹⁵

Throughout his mission as emissary, Aldouby identified educational and cultural activities, particularly performance arts, as powerful means to anchor his Zionist program. After his first night at Santa Maria al Bagno, when he met the Jewish DP who defined himself as “a ruin of a person,” Aldouby recognized that he was facing a heterogeneous humanity who needed to recover both in body and mind. He discerned that before introducing his Zionist agenda, he had to help the Jewish

¹¹¹ AJDC, Report for the Month of February 1947 – Part one: Lecce Camps Group, 8.3.1948, NY AR194554/4/44/9/662, Italy, Refugees, 1947.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Draft – Letter to Menachem, 29 January 1947, in: “Personal journal 1946-1947”, File 293, ZAPA, [Hebrew]: “There is chaos and confusion in the camp, we are being moved to another camp, and everything is falling apart. [...] Tkumah is also falling apart, it feels like a miniature 2000 years of exile [...]”

¹¹⁴ Letter to Dubkin – Activity updates, February 10, 1947, File 167, ZAPA, [Hebrew]: “The dramatic circle Tkumah was widely distributed, and I heard they moved to the Bund group in Rome. [...]. A project in which I invested a lot of energy, and that could have been the conduit for pioneering influence in camps in Italy and even beyond its borders.”

¹¹⁵ Official Mission – Days and nights, undated, File 126, p. 29, ZAPA, [Hebrew and Yiddish]; Shlichim updates n. 2, 24 December, 1946, File 131, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

DPs restore their sense of self and understand their vital role in society. In particular, Aldouby believed that by stimulating creativity among the Jewish DPs, he would be able to accomplish this preliminary step:

At times, you may feel that your strength has diminished [...] that it was all for nothing, carried away with the wind. But this is not the case. Every evening that includes a party, concert, play, commemoration, lecture etc. [matters]. [...] See, for example, the celebration, how much support, what a deep longing for redemption we saw in the hearts, and in Leivick's play *The Golem*, what depth is explored in the fundamental issues of Israel and the Goyim [the Gentiles]. [...] Or perhaps, see the joy of finding water in the well in Ashman's play *This Land* – to see how it elevated the withered hearts [...].¹¹⁶

By incorporating theater in his educational program and discourse, Aldouby built for and with the Jewish DPs a training path towards aliyah. If *The Golem*—addressing the theme of redemption—encouraged Jewish DPs to question whether there would be a future for Jews in the Diaspora, *This Land* offered aliyah as a promising solution for Jewish life after the Holocaust. Theater indeed allowed Aldouby to debate with Jewish DPs their most urgent question “where to go?”, envisaging both the struggles and the benefits that would come from the conscious choice to make aliyah. As we have shown, by performing *This Land* in Yiddish, Aldouby provided Jewish DPs with access to the daily-life challenges, sense of determination, and the dilemmas experienced by the pioneers in Eretz Israel. Not surprisingly, the audience was impressed by this realistic representation of life in Mandatory Palestine, and, when Tkumah performed the play in Santa Maria al Bagno, a Jewish DP ironically commented to Aldouby that “if the work in Eretz Israel [was] so hard, this [play was] **excellent** propaganda for emigrating to Brazil.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, Aldouby's final goal was to produce mentally and physically

¹¹⁶ Aldouby referred to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the large-scale Jewish settlement established in 1921 in the Jezreel Valley. Letter to the Shlichim updates, 11 December 1946, File 329, ZAPA, [Hebrew].

¹¹⁷ Personal journal 1946-1947, 29 December 1946 [Hebrew], File 293, ZAPA, [Hebrew, Bold character is used in the original document].

prepared candidates for aliyah, avoiding the Utopian image of the “Promised Land.”

Hence, Aldouby envisaged theater as a form of art that should evoke the past as a way to pave the road to the future. Through the preparation and performances of the play, Aldouby aimed to explore collective roots and establish what he called “landmarks,” namely offering to the Jewish DPs new elements of belonging which revolved around Eretz Israel. Based on multiple dimensions of dialogue, the stage transforms itself not only into an aesthetic performance, but also into a space of ideological debate. Aldouby’s private archives allowed us to explore the mission of one of the He-Halutz emissaries, who operated among the Jewish DPs in post-war Italy, shedding new light on educational training toward aliyah. Even if Aldouby’s mission cannot be considered representative of the work of the entire He-Halutz, his political and educational vision have certainly enabled us to understand the multiple impacts of an overlooked experience of Jewish DPs after the Holocaust: their approach to performative arts, and in particular theater.

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Keywords: Holocaust, Theatre, Displaced Persons (DPs), Zionism, Italy, Hachsharah

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