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A Dream Undone – Colleges in Israel's Periphery The Case of *Ramat Hanegev* College in Yeruham (1978–1987)

In memory of Dr. Hagit Mishkin, lovers of "Adam va`Adama", humans and humanity, who aspired to a better society.

KEY WORDS: College, periphery, sense of place, natives, locals, outsiders.

Introduction

Ramat Hanegev College, established in 1978 in the southern development town of Yeruham, set itself some highly ambitious goals, as formulated in the Regulations of the Association (1980): to change the town's image and significantly contribute to the state of Israel and the Jewish diaspora:

> […] *to be a spiritual, cultural, artistic, educational, scientific, and technological hub for the country and the Jewish people in the diaspora. To help in formulating, researching, and instilling cultural, artistic, social, educational, scientific, technological, and spiritual values for the development and advancement of Israel's society and economy in general, and specifically in the Negev.*

But in 1987, only nine years later, the ambitious college was shut down. Yeruham, established as an immigrant absorption camp (*ma'abara*) at the beginning of 1951, represents multiple exclusions in Israeli society. Like other development towns, it was essentially a 'double periphery' – both geographic and socioeconomic (Kipnis, 1989). Yeruham's remote geographic location in the northeastern Negev (*Ramat Hanegev* region), its harsh climate, its isolation and distance from the main roads, led to slow development hindered by numerous obstacles, instability and negative migration (Bar-On, 2013; Amotz, 1980). Between 1974 and 1978, Yeruham's already small population decreased by 9% – from 6,450 to 5,867, despite a high birth rate. The percentage of people supported by the welfare services was more than twice the national average. Yeruham was regarded by many as a symbol of the failure of Israeli development towns (Zivan, 2012; Livni 1978; Shenar, 1983).

The local education system was no exception to this glum picture. In 1975 Yeruham opened its first high school, but many of its youngsters continued to travel daily to schools in other places. Despite attempts made by Zalman Aran, Minister of Education from 1963 to 1969, to promote equal opportunity, schools in development towns continued to track students toward manual occupations. With poor employment prospects, the younger generation had little to look forward to in terms of improving their socioeconomic situation (Shenar, 1983; Tabechnikov, 1987; Bloch, 2015).

In this paper I wish to explore this unique initiative of establishing a college in Israel's geographic and social periphery, examine its academic and social activities and understand why it failed. I believe that the somewhat esoteric story of the college in Yeruham can add a new perspective on several issues: the role of regional colleges in Israel, the positioning of higher education in the periphery, the complex relations among the various players, and related government policies. One focal issue that will be discussed extensively is the internal rift between the newcomers who established the college, and the 'locals' who regarded them as 'outsiders'.

For the most part, this paper relies on primary sources: the Yeruham Archive, the David Tuviahu Archive of the History of the Negev, newspapers from the relevant period, local newsletters, and supplementary books. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with the founders, leaders, employees, and students of *Ramat Hanegev* College, as well as other individuals who had witnessed or played a role in the events. With quotes often presented out of context, I take full responsibility for any divergence from the speakers' original intent. Unfortunately, no mention of the college can be found at the Open University, the Archives of Bar-Ilan University, or the Council for

Higher Education. Such references would certainly have helped to complete the picture.

The New History of Education

The New History of Education is an approach that regards education as a reflection of social, cultural, and political processes (Iram, 1990). This approach may contribute to an in-depth understanding of the history of the college in Yeruham.

Some examples can be found in the following works: Uri Cohen's (2006) discussion of the Hebrew University's culture-based bond with the Jewish diaspora in the 1950s, cultivated despite opposition from Israel's political leadership; Dana Zelikowsky's (2013) study about the University of Ariel, as a reflection of the political struggle between right and left in Israel; Tzipora Shchori Rubin's (2011) description of the transition from local to global – from a small one-year college, addressing the educational needs of new immigrants, to Kaye College – an academic institution that brings the world's latest educational trends to teacher training in Israel.

Iram (1990) and Zelikowsky (2013) Note several fundamental issues related to the history of institutions: (a) The influence of mediating institutions, such as the Ministry of Education; (b) The specific term used to describe an institution – e.g. a college, an extension, or a university; (c) The institution's morphology – its historical and social context, the identity of the people involved, its guiding ideology, and the relations between the institution and the social and political environment in which it operates.

Local Identity

Applying these principles to the college in Yeruham and its environment, we must distinguish between two main social elements: the locals (natives) – Jews (– Jews who, after immigrating to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly from Islamic countries, had been sent to Yeruham by the authorities and essentially forced to become pioneers in the desert; and the newcomers – *Gar'in 'Mashmia Shalom'*, who made "*aliya*" from America in the 1970s, and chose, of their own free will, to settle in Yeruham (see below).

Two expressions used to describe the connection between a place and its inhabitants are highly relevant in this context: being 'a native' and having 'a sense of place'. The term 'native' emphasizes the ties between the original inhabitants and the territory. Natives, feeling that they represent a collective

identity and a local culture, tend to set themselves apart from incoming immigrants, who in their eyes do not belong to the place or its community. The encounter between natives and immigrants often becomes a major factor – both positive and negative – in the consolidation of the native group (Sternberg, 2004).

The natives of Israel's development towns were usually characterized by a *Mizrachi*[1] identity, quite distinct from the hegemonic powers of the reborn Hebrew culture. The holistic and arrogant nature of the hegemony were among the factors that hindered the acceptance of the great migration in the first years of the state. The key officials in all areas, as well as the decision-makers, came from this group, which also controls material assets such as land. Their bond with their town was reinforced by local cultural symbols. The local patriotism developed in the face of geographic isolation and economic inequality compensated for such disadvantages with cultural wealth and strong social interactions (Tzfadia, 2002).

The second term, 'sense of place', also describes a bond with the locale, albeit a little hazier, distinguishing between those who 'belong' and those who do not (Gurevitch, 2007), and strongly linked to a sense of community. This is specifically true of 'mission-oriented communities', marked by a common ideal and a vision of creating a better society (Kozeny, 1993; Brower, 2005; Ohayon, 2011). In Israel, many mission-oriented communities, including ''*Mashmia Shalom*' which founded the college in Yeruham, chose to operate in the social periphery. For them, the bond with the community and place were social capital of high value (Dvir, 2012).

Regional Colleges and Academic Extensions in Israel

The establishment of institutions of higher education, both in Israel and worldwide, is usually a local initiative. The motivation for such a move is that academic institutions impact their surroundings, increasing the area's prestige and attracting high-status populations (Meir & Duenias, 2006; Rosen & Razin, 2004). It must be noted that in Israel of the early 1990s, as in Europe, higher education reflected the notion that Western-European knowledge is superior to other forms of learning (Cohen, 2005; Law of the Council for Higher Education, 1958–58). Specifically, colleges in Israel's periphery contributed to awareness of the importance of obtaining an education as a key to social

[1] Mizrachi means Jews from Islamic lands.

mobility, better employment, and an improved branding of the locale. Most certainly, the many graduates of *Mizrachi* origins contributed to the rise of the *Mizrachi* middle class, as noted by Uri Cohen and Nissim Leon (2008).

As noted above, this phenomenon is not unique to Israel. One remarkable example is Nord University in the north of Sweden – established as a college by locals who sought to give their region a substantial boost. As noted by Meir and Dunias, the established Swedish institutions, much like their Israeli counterparts, opposed this initiative, fearing competition over students and resources (Meir, Duenias, 2006). But ultimately, Nord University was a resounding success story: its Faculty of Arts became a major attraction; graduates and faculty chose to stay and live nearby; employment opportunities, both direct and indirect, reduced unemployment; the number of teachers in the area increased after years of shortage; and finally, the university boosted local pride and fostered relations with local social organizations (Nord University, website). Against these remarkable achievements, *Ramat Hanegev* College appears as a sadly missed opportunity.

The first regional colleges in Israel, Tel Hai in the north and Sha'ar NaNegev in the south, were established in 1963, under the auspices of the respective regional councils. Targeting the local population, they were conceived as centers for extracurricular and cultural programs. About ten such colleges emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, combining occupational training, continuing education, and a response to the population's educational and cultural needs. Some courses enjoyed the backing of a university, awarding academic credits. The curriculums catered to the members of the region's well-established kibbutzim and moshavim, completely disregarding the populations of nearby development towns. This situation effectively mirrored the relations between the established kibbutzim and moshavim, who enjoyed a high status and close cultural ties with central Israel, and the new immigrants who had been settled by the state in their own remote moshavim and development towns (Tsahor, 2007).

Several pre-academic preparatory schools were also established in 1963. Providing students with supplementary studies to complete their matriculation, these schools were initially intended to give members of so-called 'Second Israel'[2] access to higher education. However, right from the start, most of their students were residents of central Israel, who wished to improve their chances of admission to prestigious academic programs Hayam-Yonas (2017).

[2] An expression distinguishing between different classes in Israeli society. The expression "Second Israel" describes those not identifying with the elite. The major part of this group are Jews from Islamic lands and from the periphery or neighborhoods in the periphery of large cities.

At about the same time, Bar-Ilan University established several extensions – aiming to increase its involvement in education and teacher training and expand the influence of Religious Zionism. This activity was enabled by the substantial presence of the *Mafdal* (Israeli Religious Zionist Party) in the Israeli periphery and its local governments. Israel's Council for Higher Education fiercely opposed this move, regarding it as 'academic imperialism' (Haliwa, 2015).

The initiatives described above reflected the government's policy at the time. Education Minister Zalman Aran wished to advance underprivileged populations and create equal opportunities for all, and this integrative approach continued under his successor Zevulun Hammer from the *Mafdal*, Minister of Education from 1977 to 1984. However, the great push to establish colleges came in the 1990s, under Amnon Rubinstein as Minister of Education (Bloch, 2015).

The 1980s were a critical period in the development of Israel's colleges. In the beginning about 90 post-secondary institutions, offering a range of specializations, were attended by a small number of students, and it was feared that they would not survive. But in the late 1980s and over the next decade the number of students in colleges grew seven-fold, while enrollment at universities increased by only about 50 percent. Moreover, six institutions offering unique curriculums were awarded college status by the Council for Higher Education, enabling them to offer a BA degree. The universities objected, fearing that their own budgets might be cut down, and warning against the lowering of academic standards, but to no avail. During the 1990s the number of academic colleges in Israel grew to 23, and the number of graduates with BA degrees multiplied more than 15-fold - from 400 to 6,240. In other words: the colleges grew in number and fortified their academic standing. (Maor, 2004; Volansky, 2005; Davidovitch, 2005).

Regional colleges also enjoyed substantial growth. In 1992 2,080 students studied for academic degrees at Israel's 11 regional colleges. By 1997 their number had risen to 4,000, and an additional 40,000 participated in other programs at the colleges, including the completion of matriculation requirements and enrichment courses. Jezreel Valley College, Tel Hai College, and Sapir College were awarded full academic status In the early 1990s. Other regional colleges sought recognition as a must for Israeli society, specifically as 'an opportunity for ordinary people to build themselves' (Nativ, 1997).

With this chronicle in mind, we see that the college in Yeruham, established in 1978, operated during a low point in the history of Israeli colleges: they were not yet permitted to call themselves 'academic', and strict regulations limited the number of students. Moreover, some courses taught at the colleges required the academic backing of a university, and a full year of

studies on the university's campus was a prerequisite for completing the degree (Shahan, 2020). Ultimately, the college in Yeruham was closed down in 1987, before the government changed its policy, starting to regard regional colleges as academic institutions, and the growth of Israeli colleges was renewed.

Gar'in 'Mashmia Shalom' and Founders of the College

Prof. Menahem (Mel) Alexanberg, like many of the college's lecturers and leaders, were members of *Gar'in* '*Mashmia Shalom*', founded by active Jewish Zionist Americans with families and academic degrees. The *Gar'in*'s driving force was Dr. Haim Shertok, an English Literature scholar and journalist, and a relative of Israel's first Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett. The *Gar'in* essentially shaped the new college in their own image, regarding it as the main tool for implementing their ideas (Haim Shertok, interview 7.3.2016; Shlomo Shertok, interview 17.1.2016; Bailey, 2003. Blum, letter to Rozensky, dated January 5, 1976).

The *Gar'in* made "*aliya*" in 1976. Inspired by the hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s, its members hoped to implement ideas of peace and equality in the Land of Israel. Essentially, *Gar'in* '*Mashmia Shalom*' was guided by four principles: a religious halachic way of life, social equality, environmental awareness, and striving for peace. The idea of coming to Yeruham came up at a convention of Oz VeShalom, a movement identified with the left wing of Religious Zionism (*Gar'in Mashmia Shalom*, no date; Alexenberg, interview, 23.12.2015). *Gar'in* '*Mashmia Shalom*' was atypical in both its general nature and its choice to settle in Yeruham. Unlike most immigrants from North America – who were secular and preferred to live in central Israel – the members of the *Gar'in* were religious and held left-wing political views (Leshem & Rosenbaum Tamari, 1978; Leon, 2014; Vaxman, 1998; Arieli, 1992).

Yeruham of the 1970s suffered from negative migration, rising unemployment, unstable local government, and a sense of isolation (Shenar, 1983; Livni, 1978). In the town's schools, the turnover of teachers was high, as was the percentage of students defined as 'in need of nurturing' (*te'unei tipuach*). Harel described at Maariv newspaper that only 8 of the teachers were local residents (26.12.76).

The *Gar'in*'s main goals, formulated both before and during its activities in Yeruham, were: improving the town's education system, changing its image, and helping the weaker populations. Derived from the principle of equality, these goals also went hand in hand with the *Gar'in* members' main occupation as educators. At its peak the *Gar'in* included six families and two singles. Admittedly, their number was small, but they were one of the first groups

ever to come to Yeruham of their own volition. The *Gar'in* advanced various initiatives in the town, but the jewel in their crown was *Ramat Hanegev* College (Marta Shertok, interview; Lea Shakdiel, Interview). A critical eye might view them as a patronizing 'serving elite' - saviors from the outside who emphasize the town's inferiority in order to glorify themselves (Dombrowsky, 2010).

The local authority welcomed the *Gar'in* with open arms and did everything in its power to help. One example for this high regard is the fact that, just several months after his arrival, Alexanberg was asked to represent the local council and present his ideas on education to the General Director of the Ministry of Education. Teachers, principals, and others with considerable experience in the local education system, were not pleased to see his voice eclipsing their own. This unconcealed preference of the newcomers over the locals led to growing tension between the two groups (Dahan, 2.1.78; Galter, 23.3.77; Galter and Alexenberg, 1978).

In any community, the arrival of newcomers can be seen as a threat, a potential source of conflict. According to Erez Zfadia (2002), this is especially true of Israeli development towns, where local unity served as compensation for marginalization, with any new group enhancing the sense of discrimination, deprivation, and competition over resources, and seen as endangering the local fabric. Moreover, the identity of the *Gar'in* as a 'mission-oriented community' was translated into high-value social capital. When activity in the town is regarded as an act of 'Zionism', the local population is essentially excluded from the national narrative, while the newcomers are extolled for implementing the Zionist idea – widening the gap between the two groups even further (Kozeny, 1993).

This interpretation was countered by Alexanberg at Davar Newspaper, who tried to highlight shared qualities while explaining differences, in accordance with his artistic viewpoint:

> *Do you know what I've found? One characteristic that Americans and Moroccans have in common: we are both extroverts with a warm heart. Apart from the similar sound (Americans – Moroccans). But usually, a* Mizrachi *Jew has a better understanding of the Jewish artistic perception. Why? Because his bond with Judaism is deeper, and his distance from the West is greater. Therefore, in this case, Americans are the students 'in need of nurturing'* (Davar, 21.10.1983).

Despite the appreciation expressed by the town's leaders, many of the residents did not even know the members of the *Gar'in*. Culture and language barriers underlined the foreignness of the 'crazy Americans' (*Mashmia Shalom*'s member, Review 28.1.2016). At the same time, their arrival signified hope for the future, contrasting the deep sense of isolation described by one of the locals:

> *Most of the population was just stuck in that place. A very dreary, dull life. The routine destroys every spark. The establishment of the college filled people with a renewed sense of life. It gave them the pleasure of seeing something new develop, more people will come, it will bring many people here. Even from other places in the country. New jobs, new life, not just the old faces you've seen around you for years* (Old resident, review, 9.1.2016).

In other words, the locals were ambivalent about the *Gar'in* right from the start. But both those in favor and those against regarded its members as outsiders.

The founder of the college, **Prof. Menahem (Mel) Alexanberg** (interview 23.12.2015), was born in the USA. He lectured on Art, Education, and Biology, and held top positions in a range of leading academic institutions in the US and Israel - including Columbia University, MIT, Tel Aviv University, University of Haifa, Bar-Ilan University, and Ariel University. Many of his works addressed the interfaces between art, science, technology, and culture (www.melalexenberg.com. Return date: 9.5.2018). His wife Miriam was a ceramic artist. While still living in New York he looked for teachers who would join him in the unique experiment of establishing and running a college in Yeruham.

Ramat Hanegev College – First Steps

The establishment of *Ramat Hanegev* College for Jewish Art was meant to transform the town's image. Critics might find this goal to be patronizing, relying on the newcomers' symbolic capital which gave them a considerable advantage in Israeli society of the 1970s. The innovative initiative of establishing this unique college in Israel's periphery surprised everyone who met its founder, Prof. Alexanberg. The halo around the Professor, who had given up the comforts of Columbia to come to Yeruham, generated extensive cooperation, enabling him to realize his dream (Auerbach, 13.12.1977).

The organizational envelope of *Ramat Hanegev* College for Jewish Art was quickly put together. An empty building on the edge of town was allocated for its use, and the Jewish Appeal in Montreal provided funding. Bar-Ilan University gave academic backing, and NYU promised academic credits to students from America. Within a few months the college opened its doors (Alexanberg, interciew 23.12.2015; Tabechnikov, 1975).

The beginning looked promising. The needed equipment was purchased, and registration began. In the fall of 1978, the *Ramat Hanegev* Institute – as

it was called at the time – opened a nonacademic regional center offering extracurricular programs for people from Yeruham and its vicinity. In addition, under the auspices of Bar-Ilan University, courses in Education, English, and Judaism were offered. 'The National Center for Documenting Success in Education' provided a practical side to complement the theoretical studies in Education. The management, administration, and most lecturers were members of *Gar'in* '*Mashmia Shalom*'. Alexanberg served as President, and Shertok was in charge of the preparatory program (Alexenberg, 10.4.78; Shenar, 1983).

The Vision Encounters Reality

The founders set far-reaching goals for the college, including the establishment of a National Center for the Documentation of Success in Education, and objectives in the field of Jewish Art. The college declared its intention to:

> *Enhance Jewish consciousness and thereby contribute to the development of the Jewish People and the State of Israel* […] *Serve as a center of art including study programs and research seeking the significance of art in the life of the Jewish People* […] *Become a spiritual, cultural, artistic, educational, scientific, and technological hub for the country and the Jewish people in the diaspora. Help in formulating, researching, and instilling cultural, artistic, social, educational, scientific, technological, and spiritual values for the development and advancement of Israel's society and economy in general, and specifically in the Negev"* (Association regulations).

These proclamations defined a range of regional, national, and global targets. In real life, however, local goals were also addressed. In its first year the college opened a preparatory program for completing the matriculation in mathematics and English, as well as several academic courses. 19 students completed the first matriculation program. Mathematics was taught by a native of Yeruham, a genuine local role model studying for an advanced degree at Ben-Gurion University. National Service girls offered tutoring. Ultimately, all but one of the program's graduates went on to study for diplomas in various professions: nursing, social work, teaching, engineering, and more (list of students, no date). The preparatory program attracted growing numbers of students, reaching 45 in the last cohort (Goldstein, 1985).

Responding to local needs, the college offered more tracks from its second year onwards. The first to enjoy this opportunity were employees of

the region's local authorities who, encouraged by their employers to complete a 12-year education, also received generous subsidies) Alexenberg, May 1978(. The Director General of the College, Shimon Turjeman (review, 14.3.2016), initiated participation in a special BA program aiming to involve local activists in Project Renewal – a major social initiative of the Begin administration launched in the late 1970s, allocating extensive resources to improving living conditions, education, and culture in distressed neighborhoods and development towns, and authorizing local leaderships to decide how these funds should be used (Gal-Nor & Blander, 2013; Churchman & Sadan, 2003).

In exchange, participants were required to volunteer in their own neighborhoods. The program proved a great success, a real breakthrough for everyone involved. Long-term monitoring indicates that 85% of the participants completed their studies, some with honors, and quite a few graduates went on to develop impressive careers, eventually reaching senior positions such as mayors, supervisors in the Ministry of Education, and more (Summary report, 1982–3).

Other programs at the college in Yeruham aimed to improve the local education system. The first target audience were those teachers who did not have a teaching diploma or even a matriculation certificate. A BA program was built especially for them, once more in collaboration with the Open University. Young people without a matriculation certificate were also offered teacher training, under the assumption that the lack of an official certificate would be compensated for by other advantages: close acquaintance with the local system, extensive guidance, and motivation to provide the town's children with a better starting point (BA program for teaching staff, February 1984).

The college applied teaching methods that were considered highly advanced at the time, such as videotaping and analyzing lessons. Continuing education for teachers was offered in Judaism, art, environmental science, and more (Tabechnikov, 1975). Another initiative was Gilyonot Yeruham, instruction pages proposing active teaching of fundamental concepts in Judaism in elementary schools (Alexenberg, review, 2015). Enthusiastically supporting the college, the Ministry of Education defined it as a 'center for designing study programs in Judaism on behalf of the Ministry's Pedagogic Office.' (The Yeruham local council, an overview).

The college's ambitious plan, to 'transform Yeruham from a disadvantaged town into a dynamic educational center' (Galter & Alexenberg, 1978) was essentially based on recruiting educators from central Israel and offering them senior positions, high salaries, and excellent working conditions. However, this reliance on external forces underlined the lack of trust in the abilities of the

local population, is stark contrast to the program presented to the town's youth (Dahan, 2.1.1978; Shapira, 12.4.1981; Auerbach, 4.9.1981).

Thus, the programs designed for the residents of Yeruham and its environs usually proved successful from the local perspective. Yet even locally, the picture was far from perfect. In 1981, following personal disputes between the college and the management of the Kol Yaakov religious public school, the school's teachers refused to participate in programs at the college (Old resident, interview 2.1.2016).

In other words, the local leadership, Yeruham's more educated residents, with whom a common basis for discourse might have been found, were in effect those who refused to cooperate with the college and its plans, regarding them as a threat to the town's social fabric.

In 1981 a Midrasha was also established in Yeruham, offering day seminars and tours in the area with an emphasis on Judaism, the heritage of *Mizrachi* Jews, and art in the desert (Alexenberg, review).

During the decline of the college, the Technological College in Beer Sheva opened preparatory programs for practical engineering studies for employees of the town's factories. Meir Sahar (review, 8.2.2016), a long-time resident of Yeruham, who served as the last Director General of the College from 1985 to 1987, regrets this, feeling that a similar track, which he tried to promote as more suitable for the local population, was not sufficiently emphasized or appreciated. His view highlights the tension between 'us' and 'them'. It must, however, be remembered that at the time the college was actually dying, and other initiatives also suffered a similar fate.

In conclusion, it may be said that the tensions, both overt and covert, between the locals and the newcomers with regard to the place and role of the college in Yeruham were there right from the start, intensifying in its final years. One major point of contention was the contents that should be taught at the college. The college's main activities revolved around programs for completing a high school education or some form of alternative, with nonacademic programs attended by about 100 students per year. At the same time, the unique track of Art and Judaism, opened in 1980 as the focal mission of the college, and promising an art teaching diploma, remained marginal: it drew no more than several dozen participants, about half of them from Yeruham, and the rest from other parts of Israel and the USA, Volunteers as part of 'Service to the People', with most dropping out in the first year and only 11 ultimately graduating from the program (Salomon, summary, 1982–3; Shachan, 8.4.1980). In a sense, these facts could be seen as corroborating the view that colleges lowered academic standards while perpetuating the marginality of the towns in which they operated. (Maor, 2004)

Financial Challenges

Throughout its years of operation, the college also experienced constant financial instability, with disorganized management, too many employees, and a constantly growing deficit. The organizational structure, based on the model of a university, further increased the expenses (Minutes of the meeting of the college's board of trustees of 28.2.1984). Consequently, artists and lecturers who taught at the college did not receive their wages, and considerable sums were owed to the Income Tax Authority, National Insurance Institute, retirement funds, suppliers, and others, with interest growing constantly. By 1986 debt payments consumed about half of the total budget, so that essentially, the college was paralyzed (*Ramat Hanegev* College, budget for 1986–1987; Sahar, 8.5.1986.(

Since financial stability had never been achieved, the college continued to rely on Yeruham's Local Council, which was far from wealthy, to say the least. Ultimately, it was a weak college relying on a town that also suffered from many weaknesses. The overall atmosphere and relationships between people at the college, which were warm and family-like at the beginning, gradually became unpleasant (Tabechnikov, 1987).

The Shutdown:
'Everything just fell apart, all the visions, all the dreams'
(Employed in college, interview, 16.7.2014)

After seven years of activity, Alexanberg went on Sabbatical and never returned to Yeruham. Dr. Moshe Dror (Davidovitz), curator of the Jewish Art Museum in New York and a lecturer in psychology and futurism at NYU, took his place, also replacing Shimon Turjeman as Director General of the College. Dror married Simcha (interview, 8.2.2016), a Yeruham resident and the college's secretary. Together they ran the college (Board of Trustees meeting minutes, 13.11.1986).

But the college was steadily declining. Dror looked for an initiative that would rekindle the Art track, but this also died out (Dror, February 1986). A program in computerized graphics for films was also considered. But like many of the college's programs, this too was ahead of its time (Student, interview, 9.1.2016; Dror, 20 January 1986; Dror, 12.1.1986.).

A committee of educators appointed by Education Minister Zevulun Hammer advised that the College should be expanded and budgeted. Potential learners included about 1,000 teachers living in the area, students

from overseas, soldiers from nearby military bases, and the general Negev population – expected to grow to 100,000 by 1990, following the IDF's withdrawal from Sinai. The committee emphasized the uniqueness of the college and the opportunities it opened for the local population, stating that 'the college is needed in this place at this time.' (Shachan, 1980) In hindsight, it seems that the committee's unrealistic forecast mainly reflected the wishes of its members, who truly wanted the college to succeed.

In contrast to the optimism of the Ministry of Education, a report commissioned by the President of the college Moshe Dror at the beginning of 1985 depicted the college as a foreign element, out of place in the town. The author, Dr. Yaakov Goldstein (1985) from the Tel Hai College claimed that the size of Yeruham's population did not warrant the opening of a college, irrespective of its make-up and academic level. The attempt to base the college on the local population and bring in more young people lacked the support and supervision of the local authority. From the financial point of view, both the motives for the establishment of the College and its viability at the present time seemed doubtful.

In its final year the college offered a matriculation program, an accounting course, and secretary training, alongside several courses from the Open University. The original promise for a senior art teacher diploma recognized by the Ministry of Education was replaced by certification as an 'informal education instructor' after three full years of study. Yet, despite the small number of students, this track employed four full-time teachers. (Board of Trustees, 5.8.1987).

In 1986 Moshe Dror resigned. An effort was made to keep the college alive with local manpower, but programs dwindled, and in the summer of 1987 the college was shut down (Shachan, 1980).

Young people from Yeruham who had studied or worked at the college sorely regretted its closing, regarding it as a missed opportunity:

> *The college is a sore point to this day. Ever since I made "aliya" as a small boy, and they brought us to this place, leaving us in the desert in the middle of the night, there was nothing here! Nothing! And now there was a chance for something, and they ruined it. The local authority didn't see the future. Instead of developing the college it killed it and took the funds. the stupidity of leaders. There could have been a great university in this town. The whole place would have been different!* (Student, interview, 6.3.2016).

This quote reflects the great significance attached to the college by its students – much beyond the usual expectations of students from their place of

study. Local students believed that if the college had continued its operation, it would have attracted a new population and improved the academic level of local schools. They attribute its failure to lack of cooperation from the local authority and the naivete of the newcomers from America. In their eyes, the main obstacle to its growth was the founders' lack of familiarity with the political and bureaucratic systems, both local and national, characterized as they were by envy and spitefulness. The quote above, from a student whose family had lived in Yeruham for decades, may be seen as suggesting low self-esteem, neediness, and dependence on saviors from outside. Moreover, the student regards the local leadership as the main barrier to the vision's realization.

Other opinions on the college and how it should have operated spoke specifically of the grandiose plans of its founders. Goldstein vehemently demanded that they 'descend from the sky back to earth' (1985) and focus on building programs that respond to the local potential, including completion of the matriculation and 12 years of schooling. Essentially his report suggested that the college had reached a dead end.

The local council and other agencies, including the Ministry of Labor and Welfare, the Ministry of Education, and the Center for Guidance of Discharged Soldiers, saw the continued operation of the college as a public challenge (Bar-On, 30.6.1986).

From the national perspective, as noted in the proposed plan, it was feared that the vision of development towns as innovators would be lost. In hindsight, this aspiration appears to have been quite impracticable. From the local perspective, there was a wish to preserve the positive aspects: hope for the future offered to the town's youth, and the vitality of the bustle, laughter, and activity of young people (Action plan for 1987–1990).

In other words, even if realistically and economically, the college was unviable, there was a consensus about its substantial contribution to the town's youth and to its image. The fear of losing the vision for the advancement of all development towns may reflect the initial hope that the college would contribute to the branding of Yeruham as a leader in educational innovation.

Ramat Hanegev College in Yeruham – Discussion and Conclusions

The story of the failure of *Ramat Hanegev* College, which contrasts with the growth and success of other colleges in Israel's periphery – such as Tel Hai College, Sapir College, and Jezreel Valley College, raises a few queries. Was the attempt to establish the college too ambitious, essentially dissociated from

the local and national reality? Was the American idea of locating the college far away from large cities foreign to the Israeli reality? Did the college see Yeruham as a test site for its special experiment? Were its leaders extolled at the town's expense? Or was it the other way around: did the uncooperative local and national agencies extinguish a unique idea that could have transformed Yeruham from a remote town with a problematic image into a national or even international leader? Did the costly focus on art ultimately cause the demise of the college? Was this particular choice, reflecting the dreams of the founders, unsuitable for the local population? Or maybe, as one student put it, "a crazy man came, opened a college" (Student, interview, 9.1.2016), but there was no one there who could adapt the big dream to real life?

These questions suggest many possible reasons for the downfall of the college in Yeruham. There is no one clear answer. Apparently, a variety of elements came together to prevent its growth. As noted above, throughout its operation and all the way to the end, attempts were made to examine both its economic and academic viability. The contents of the curriculum and its contribution to the region were also in dispute (Shachan, review, (20.7.2020.

Gar'in Mashmia Shalom – Foreigners vs. Natives

Even before the college was established, the arrival of *Gar'in Mashmia Shalom* in the remote desert town aroused many reactions. The locals' attitude toward the 'crazy Americans' who had decided to settle in Yeruham strengthened their 'sense of place', as well as their national affiliation, as they watched the newcomers struggle with the unfamiliar environment and language. These initial feelings would undergo many transformations.

The extensive media coverage enhanced the negative aspects of the local nativeness and increased the gap between the locals and their 'saviors' from outside. Even after the *Gar'in* had settled in Yeruham and built a community that gave its members a 'sense of place' of their own, the press continued to distinguish blatantly between the locals and the newcomers:

> *Yeruham has been transformed from a town that ejects its residents into a town that absorbs new residents; from a town with 'negative selection' – whom the stronger and more capable choose to leave, into a town that attracts people with such qualities* (Meged, Davar, 6.3.1981).

Praise for the new residents involved marking the locals as weak and untalented, since they were the ones who had remained in the town. Articles presenting the college and its leaders as saviors of Yeruham were likely to belittle the natives.

The presence of a strong group from outside, and the fact that many of the *Gar'in's* members held advanced academic degrees and liberal religious views, and relied on international resources, in a traditional town where many had not even completed eight years of elementary schooling, underlined the gap between 'us' – the locals, and 'them' – the foreigners. When the local council elected Alexanberg to represent its education system, just a few months after his arrival, instead of listening to the leaders of the local schools, tension with the local intelligentsia was engendered. In other words, the encounter with the founders of the college brought the locals together as an oppositional community right from the start (Sternberg, 2004). This early encounter had far-reaching consequences, when the teaching staff of Kol Yaakov School refused to attend the college's programs, regarding the college as a threat to the locals. Even though this was never said explicitly, it seems that the tension between *Ashkenazi*[3] *and Mizrahi* groups increased the gap even further.

In accordance with the methodology of the New History of Education, the relations between the college and the locals should be examined against the background of the different definitions of nativeness and the relationship between center and periphery, as they were in the 1970s. Israeli nativeness, which had positive connotations, nurtured the national-secular model. The 'other' was the religious Jew from the diaspora, perceived as weak and disconnected (Ben Refael, 2001). The elitist and condescending nature of Israel's hegemonic groups, their control over both cultural and material assets, and their patronizing attitude toward *olim* from Middle Eastern countries, made it difficult for the latter to find their place in the young country. The political, religious, social, and cultural differences underlined their 'otherness'. As a result, the construction of development towns, starting in the 1950s, under conditions of geographical isolation and economic and cultural inequality, generated a strong *Mizrahi* identity. And in fact, the 'sense of place' and nativeness of those who had settled in Yeruham in the 1950s and their children were characterized as *Mizrahi* traditional.

Supposedly, the religious *olim* from the USA could have been seen as 'others' by Israel's hegemonic groups. But their country of origin, the time of their aliya, the fact that they were *Ashkenazi* Jews, and their direct ties with key government agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the higher education system, toned down their otherness. Moreover, *Gar'in Mashmia Shalom*, identified as a mission-oriented community, was perceived as a 'serving

[3] Ashkenazi means Jews from Europe.

elite', bringing 'social capital' to the land. Their self-perception, as a group that does not need the support of the Ministry of Integration, but rather partners with the 'Ministry of Contribution', also supported this notion (Leon, 2014; Meged, Davar, 6.3.1981). Be that as it may, within Yeruham they were viewed as representatives of the elite. Thus, there was a built-in gap substantially impacting the relationship between the locals, with their peripheral identity, and the members of *Gar'in Mashmia Shalom*.

It may well be assumed that the *olim* from America were not aware of how deeply the *Mizrahi olim*, sent upon arrival to remote development towns, felt that they had been wronged. Despite Alexanberg's attempt to emphasize similarities between *olim* from America and Morocco, interactions between the two groups were severely challenged when the newcomers enjoyed high prestige while the locals were harshly stereotyped. Moreover, one of the college's major goals was to change the town's image – in the eyes of both its residents and the outside world. This goal was never achieved, as evidenced by the works of Eli Avraham (1996, 2009). However, its very definition, as the leaders of the college had in fact been forewarned, might have been perceived as a mixture of sympathy, paternalism, and condescension (Shachan, review, 20.7.2020).

The College – Between the Local and the Global

The college was a pioneering initiative, intended to create a 'spiritual, cultural, artistic, educational, scientific, and technological center for the Israeli population and the Jewish diaspora' (Regulations of the Association, 1980). The founders professed their intention to work for 'the development and advancement of the society and economy of Israel in general, and the Negev in particular.' (ibid). These ambitious ideas go beyond the specific locale. The founders did wish to develop the town, but their failure suggests that the initiative was foreign to Yeruham and its population. Moreover, it underlined the multifaceted peripherality of the locals, and their dependence on the country's social and geographic center (Dolev, Ma`ariv, 14.8.1981).

The *Ramat Hanegev* College also received backing from Eliezer Shmueli, the Director General of Israel's Ministry of Education, who claimed that educational experiments in development towns usually did more harm than good, but saw the college in Yeruham as an opportunity to reduce the vast educational gaps between residents of Israel's center and periphery (Shmueli, 2011). It is interesting to note that many of the proposed interventions, intended to improve the local education system, relied on the ideas of Karl Frankenstein, who believed that students' hardships resulted from their native environment (Eiger, 1976). Even though general opposition to this approach

had not yet emerged in the 1970s, it did generate antagonism from leaders of the local education system.

The success of the college lay in the opportunities it opened for its graduates. It created a change in awareness regarding higher education, while providing a platform that enabled the town's natives to catch up with their peers in central Israel, by completing their high school education. In addition, even though the college was not essential for obtaining a BA degree through the Open University, it did provide a supportive framework for adults who probably would not have studied otherwise. We may conclude that the college contributed to its graduates' self-efficacy and provided them with a ticket to the future and to a professional life that promised to be better than their parents'.

Throughout its existence, the college served as a platform for collaboration between natives and newcomers. As noted, once the general mold of the college had been shaped, many of its nonacademic programs were promoted by local agencies. These programs were a source of hope for the townspeople – hope that they might shape their own lives and reduce their dependence on outsiders. At the same time, the track of Art in the Mirror of Judaism, reflecting the interests of the founders, did not live up to the high expectations. This unique multicultural program, which could have served as a magnet for students from other regions, and was critical for justifying the college's operation, failed and pulled the other programs down with it.

Yet even before this happened things were far from idyllic, as evidenced by the refusal of Kol Yaakov's leadership to cooperate with the college. This opposition may have contributed to the balance between internal and external elements, preventing paternalism, since the college might have served as fertile ground for a dependence relationship.

The relations of the college with the local authority should also be noted in this context. The substantial gap between the college and the locals was exacerbated when the college was in financial straits. The expectation was that the local authority should cover the college's debts without having any say in its organizational structure (Leon, 2014). This meant that local political circumstances also affected the college.

A Comparative View

Another angle on the story of *Ramat Hanegev* College can also highlight the missed opportunity. In comparison, Nord University, located in the geographic periphery of Sweden, also started out as a local college with a flagship program of art and local culture. Today, having grown into a prestigious university, it draws more than half of its students from across

Sweden and other countries. Moreover, students see its remoteness as an advantage, allowing them to study in a natural environment that increases chances for excellence and offers a special social experience. As noted earlier, Nord University also contributes a great deal to employment, teaching quality, education, and local pride in its environs. (Meir, Duenias, 2006).

The same is true for Israel. Unlike *Ramat Hanegev* College, the Tel Hai, Sapir, and Jezreel Valley Colleges, as well as others, enjoyed financial support from their respective regional councils and a stable clientele from nearby kibbutzim. While lecturers came from the academic 'ivory tower', management was local. The population of Sderot, a development town quite close to Sapir College, did not take part in the initiative in the 1960s, and similarly, the residents of Kiryat Shmona were excluded from Tel Hai College in the beginning. Consequently, the natives of these development towns did not enjoy academic opportunities near their homes, with college curriculums dictated by surveys in the kibbutzim. In Yeruham, on the other hand, natives were given an opportunity, but the programs were determined by the founders alone, without listening to the voice of the locals (Gigi, 2017).

Ashkelon College, established in the late 1960s, also relied on a financially challenged local authority, that was unable to help the college grow. Like the college in Yeruham, Ashkelon College had its own visionary – Dr. Pinchas Haliwa, who worked to develop the college until it attained partial independence in the late 1990s. Unlike the leaders of *Ramat Hanegev* College, who had come from the outside, Haliwa grew up in Ashkelon and had been a student at the college. The story of Ashkelon College demonstrates the importance of in-depth acquaintance with the field, in order to offer curriculums that are suitable for the local population. It is also an inspiring lesson about holding on to a dream against all odds (Haliwa, 2015). At the same time, it should be noted that this was not the only factor contributing to the growth of the college. Ashkelon's location, closer to the center, in a highly populated region, was also critical for its eventual success.

Ultimately, the great vision of the college transforming Yeruham from a poor town in Israel's social and geographic periphery into a place that lights up its entire environment and impacts the state of Israel and the Jewish people, was not realized. Far from it. At its peak, the college served 328 learners, their great majority in nonacademic programs. The difficulty of recruiting students in this geographically remote area, sparsely inhabited and far from main roads, the constant tension between residents and newcomers, and the complex financial challenges prevented its growth, and in 1987, after nine years of operation, it was shut down. Timing also played a major role in the fate of

the college. Operating when colleges in Israel were at a low point, it did not survive long enough to join the renewed momentum enjoyed by other colleges in the periphery. The college held great potential for generating an essential change in both the town's image and the status of its graduates; it was an initiative ahead of its time, that left behind it a sense of missed opportunities.

In contrast to the unfavorable beginnings, family members of the college's founders stayed in Yeruham for decades and are now deeply rooted in the town's multicultural community, raising a third and fourth generation. The walls of suspicion, even if they have not disappeared completely, have become blurred, almost transparent. Moreover, the hundreds of alumni who completed their studies at the college, natives of development towns in *Ramat Hanegev*, attest to its contribution to making higher education accessible in this region. For them, the college broke glass ceilings and changed their prospects in life, thereby opening new horizons for their children.

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