

Old, new road

The world is no more/I shall have to carry you (Paul Celan)

What is a way? Where are we going? When shall we get there? Buddhists have answered these questions quite simply: The way, or road, or path, is just a gap between things. We are going here. We shall arrive now.

The journey, undertaken by Amos Kenan's protagonist in *The Road to Ein Harod*, ends, like all journeys, at its point of departure:

*"I recognise the spot, there's no mistake about it. I can find it in the dark without a compass, without stars, without a map, without anything. Ein Harod is the place where everything starts, and I know how to get to the beginning, but there is nothing here."*¹

In the tangible darkness of a nation-state that had awoken into a nightmare, he leaves his home in Tel-Aviv, heading for "Free Ein Harod", following the "Road to the . Kvutza (hamlet)" which is "neither short nor long"²

He swims northwards to Sidne-Ali beach, continues on foot to the orchards of the Sharon plane towards the southern triangle, teams up with Mahmoud/Rafi, who can find the third road from Carthage to Ein Harod through the Alps, kidnaps a brigadier-general, crosses eucalyptus groves, wades through swamps, subterranean caves and the armageddon army base before reaching the valley and finally, Ein Harod.

For well over a year, artist Efrat Gal-Nur trod that same path towards liberty, gathering forensics, combing the earth's memory for clues and testimonies, pasting one stratum upon another, squeezing out of the journey what Plato called Khora, which means place, but also mother, that is here and also not here. She processed myriad viewpoints and found that the way diverges into the ground too, as well as sidelong, or as the brigadier general puts it in the novel: "The great, unusual thing, is not to think ahead. The great thing is to think sideways and backwards."

The flow chart she presents her at the *Mishkan, Museum of Art, Ein Harod*, doesn't at all resemble a map, or a road, but rather, a multi-headed fabric, shooting out its subterranean internodes whichever way without any hierarchy, centre or end, leaving the traveller where she is. It would seem that Gal-Bur is engaged in dialogue with the protagonist, offering a multiplicity of choices where he sees a single road:

"The road to the Kvutza, I say and repeat, is neither short nor long. Except that this time, unlike all other times, it has a different aspect. Not like in the beautiful days or nights."

¹ Kenan, Amos: *The Road to Ein Harod*, Trans: Anselm Hollo, Grove Press, New York, 1988 (p.105)

² There, p. 3

*Nor in memories. Not in what used to be. And not in what you used to be. Nor in what you want to be or dream of being. What you have been is dead. What you wanted is dead. Memory, too, is dead. Only you are alive, only you are still alive, echo and memory, shadow and reflection, end of days whose beginning has been lost along the road that is neither short nor long.”*³

If the state of Israel was born of a Utopian novel, Altneuland/Tel-Aviv, about a place yet to be, why not end with a dystopian novel about a place that no longer is? When modernist writer J.H. Brenner came to visit the men and women of the Joseph Trumpeldor worker's battalion (Gdud Ha'avoda) in Ein Harod, he used to hum along the Zionist anthem: "We shall be the first". *The Road to Ein Harod*'s narrator sings of those who will remain last. And when the newfangled world is no longer one that can be seen or heard, he goes deaf and blind. With his inner ear turned inwards, he can still hear his dreamt world about to be created:

*In Ein Harod
all is well
Everything's free of charge
You wish to go somewhere?
No problem, young sir,
The coachman will stop
And help you atop
You may even hang onto the reigns.*⁴

Amos Kenan's father, Ya'akov Levine, arrived in Palestine aboard the "S.S Ruslan" to join Trumplerdor's "worker's battalion" who set camps both in Ein Harod and Tel Aviv. In 1927, the year of his son's birth, a fraction of dissidents, lead my Menachem (Mendel) Elkind, disillusioned with the Kibbutz, and more importantly, with the prospects of ever resolving Zionism with their free and just ideal-society, left the battalion. Decades later, Kenan would write: "The nation-state killed my homeland." By invitation from Stalin, the group founded a Hebrew Kibbutz in the prairies of Crimea, naming it "A new way", and in Esperanto: "*Voyo Nova*".

*"When the Way prevails in the world, appear;
when it does not, hide!" (Confucius)*

³ Kenan, Amos: *The Road to Ein Harod*, (p.12-13)

⁴ Nursery rhyme by Ze'ev

Towards the end of his life, as he laboured on his unfinished opus “The History of Despair”, while re-reading Kafka and Dostoyevski, Jeremiah and Ecclesiastes, Josephus and Chandler, Amos Kenan developed an interest in Taoism, or Way-ism. The man who’d spent his entire life gazing onto the golden, high road, ever here, ever now, where all he had to do was reach out to the ground for traces of thyme and sage, while still longing for it - had discovered the empty way that has no destination. After his home caught fire and his Taoist library burned to a cinder, he re-purchased the books, like a donkey trudging up the same dusty road.

“The way up and the way down are one and the same” (Heraclitus)

The idea behind “Voyo Nova”, was to start a Kibbutz, or communal collective, with the hope that other Jews will follow suit and settle there, not in Palestine. But idealists from Ein Harod and Tel Joseph had no place in Stalin’s soviet society and by the 1930’s, the soviet state no longer looked favourably upon the Jewish Kibbutz. *Voyo Nova* had become a “*The brotherhood of nations Kolkhoz*”, with new Russian and Ukrainian inhabitants. In the novel, *The Road to Ein Harod*, anyone suspected, rightly or otherwise, that they are heading for free Ein Harod, are either shot dead or turned in. In *Voyo Nova*, anyone suspected of Zionism was turned in. As a result, most of the settlement’s original founders, including Elkind himself, were either killed or made to disappear during the great purges of the 1930’s. The few Jews that remained there during world war II, were the last worker’s battalion’s family, and three children of members who’d been arrested (including Elkind’s daughter). These were pointed out to the Gestapo by a Ukrainian member of the Kolkhoz, rounded up and buried alive in the old well of *Voyo Nova*.

In the valley I strode,

When I felt a great thirst

Then came by the streamlet

they call: Ein Harod

I shall walk no further.

This fort shall I hold

Here I can rest

Here I can live,

Here I can halt,

This is Ein Harod

(Nursery rhyme by Aharon-Zeev Ben Yshai)

Kenan's generation, wrote Ran Kasmi-Illan about Gal-Nur's project, knew how to "advance along the horizon stretched out before them", while current generation has neither a horizon nor sky to speak of. In fact, preceding Kenan, was the generation of Utopias, with his own - caught in the middle. Quite possibly then, in Hegelian hindsight, like the owl of Minerva that spreads its wings only at dusk, Kenan's generation could only gage utopias after their failure. *The Road to Ein Harod*, could be seen from this vantage point then, quite simply as prophecy: what will be the fate of those who failed to integrate their socialist, biblical and nationalist prospects? Ein Harod of the nursery rhyme, where one can rest and live, had remained, despite Kenan's indigenous Canaanism, something like Kafka's Messiah who will come one day after his arrival, or the Rav Kook's delayed redemption. Lurking behind them, is the anxiety that the homeland might have always been an exile:

"I look at the land. In Mahmoud's land, I do not exist. He is not singing about the tombs of my ancestors. My land, he sings, but I have never been part of it. In Mahmoud's land I have neither parcel nor patrimony." ⁵

In her project, Gal-Nur turns the meeting point between place, time and identity - into something quite tangible, secular, a new Jew in old attire. Amos Kenan's world is the tangible one, this world, this place - whose every blade of grass is a gateway to in its beatific sense. Yet with yearnings for a golden "Sabre" modernism, "Makom"⁶, served, ready to consume, painted on food-trays, Gal-Nur, in a previous work⁷ rekindles the question.

"Here, underground, everything up there loses its meaning.

Who is Rafi up there?

A man I loved up there.

And now?

Now there is no more up there. Now everything is down here." ⁸

It is believed by some Dharma scholars, that the Buddha did not in fact believe in reincarnation. That he was in fact, an existentialist who believed only in this life, this place, sitting under this tree. From this standpoint, it's possible that Amos Kenan's old-new interest in the Tao, gave him a new kind of insight into what a road, or way,

⁵ Kenan, p. 82

⁶ Makom means both "a place" and God.

⁷ Givat-Haim Ihud (please check)

⁸ Kenan, p. 61

or path is; where the peak might be on the way to the mountain, where the existence or lack of - free Ein Harod are one and the same, and where a way without a destination - but with a partner, is better than the other way round. In Pascal's terms, there is a road-shaped vacuum in the heart of those who walk the road and shall never arrive.

*The manifestation of Tao is the form of being,
Which originates from the non-being of the void, the Great Tao. (Tao Te Ching)*