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THE DINOSAUR AND THE HOUSING PROBLEM

Moshe Hazani

With a bit of land and the build-your-own home method, a way can be found to end the housing shortage for tens of thousands of Israelis - both sabras and new immigrants - who are currently at the mercy of bureaucracies and who simply cannot cope with inflationary prices.

In this article I shall deal with two topics that, at first glance, seem quite unrelated: the rapid and energetic "swallowing up" of land by Israeli Arabs in the Triangle area and in the Galilee through spontaneous home-building and the housing shortage that is eating away at Israeli society, a housing shortage that is making tens of thousands of Israelis absolutely miserable and that has already led to the emigration of whole families from this country.

What relationship exists between these two seemingly unconnected topics?

A dinosaur. An aging, weary, sclerotic dinosaur: bureaucratic centralism, which is unable to move a muscle without the help of gigantic budgets (and, even then, its movements are quite erratic) and which, nevertheless, is unwilling to relinquish its hold on its monopoly of power - thus devastating fertile soil and letting small, quick rats do the hard work. And these rats really work fast!

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The M. family came to Israel during the 1950's. The head of the family immediately began to look for work. When he landed a job, he naturally began to look for housing. However, the family's resources were limited. An apartment in Tel-Aviv was out of the question. The family, therefore moved to Petah Tikva - not far from the newly found place of employment. But even in Petah Tikva - and during the 1950's to boot! - apartments were expensive. Friends had pity on the family and suggested that a piece of land belonging to the Jewish National Fund could be obtained. A piece of land in some remote spot among abandoned olive trees. The M. family rented the land and built its house there. The neighbors were people who had emigrated from the same country as the M. family and who, to a great extent, had, like the M. family, come to this neighborhood because of limited financial resources.

The families are happy and only the dinosaur opposes.

The agencies charged with the task of populating the country's rural areas are the sclerotic dinosaur. These agencies invested practically nothing in these areas. No roads were paved. No sewage canals were dug. No street lighting was introduced. The only installations that were made were for water and electricity. Virtually no investment was made in the infrastructures of these areas. And yet the families - and here is the surprising point - are happy. Without roads, without sewage canals (pits were dug for absorption of waste material), but with a roof above their heads. And they were content.

As the years passed, the people in these areas became more established, roads were paved (funding came from the residents themselves!), the trees grew higher and the houses were extended. The prices of the plots of land have increased astronomically and naturally discourage others because they are simply too high. A housing shortage has therefore been created.

If more pieces of lands "thaw out" in 1979 as was the case in the 1950's, the housing shortage will be ended and thousands of immigrants currently residing in immigrant absorption centers because of a lack of housing, will solve their problems just as the M. family - which had resided in an immigrant absorption center in the 1950's - solved its own problem. Today's immigrants shouldn't look for solutions exclusively in the center of the country; go out and examine "build your own home" projects throughout the country and you will see how houses have almost overnight mushroomed in these various areas. And all of the residents are happy. Israeli Arabs are also building under the "build your own home" program - and they are just as happy. . .

Who isn't happy? The dinosaur. Although sclerotic, the dinosaur still has enough strength to maintain its monopoly.

With all sorts of empty excuses - such as the high cost of infrastructure installation - the dinosaur is trying to do a whitewash job. But, as I have already emphasized, the M. family set up its household even without an infrastructure - and was grateful for the opportunity.

The same can be said for the B. family which also arrived in this country in the 1950's. The family looked for employment and found it. The family looked for a place in which to live - and the agencies charged with the task of populating the country's rural areas pushed the family into a tottering Arab dwelling in an abandoned village that had neither roads nor any infrastructure. But the B. family was grateful for the opportunity and got down to work. Slowly the house underwent renovation; it almost seemed as if the house were renovating itself. A room was added, then another. A garden was added. And a lawn. Roads were paved and (top quality) educational institutions were established. And when one of the children reached adulthood, he went off and built his own home, not far from that of his parents.

The main point of this story is the same as that of the previous story: everyone is happy.

From Savyon to Yahud, from South Africa to Yemen

And now, with your permission, let's have a look at the homes of these two families: in photo A we see the B. family's home and in photo B we see the M. family's home (actually, to be honest, the home of the M. family's neighbors, since I didn't ask the permission of the families).

And now a question: Where does the M. family live and where does the B. family live?

Well. . . the M. family lives in Savyon and the B. family lives in Yahud.

And now, another question: In which photo do we see the Yahud home and in which photo do we see the Savyon home?

I am quite sure that you do not know the answer to this question. And now, please tell me: What is the location of the house shown in photo C - a house that is in the process of being built at this moment? I am quite sure that you do not know the answer to this question as well.

The point, of course, is that, when people are given carte blanche, they do not need guidelines from any controlling agency, that is, from the "knowledgeable" dinosaur. Whether these families are from South Africa, from Yemen or from Morocco, they know how to determine their own fate, to such an extent that today one finds great difficulty in being able to distinguish between certain districts in Yahud and Savyon, whether in physical terms or in terms of the quality of social life. And, as many of us know, children from Savyon attend the comprehensive school in Yahud.

Tottering dwellings, renovation and social well-being

You might perhaps wonder why I presented the first group of settlers in Savyon as a forlorn lot. After all, it is a well-known fact that all of the residents in Savyon are "millionaires"! Well, the truth of the matter is that the first settlers there did in fact lack financial means. The millionaires - the Israeli nouveaux riches - arrived later on, in order to be in the company of the community's English-speaking society. The same thing happened to another community composed of residents who had social prestige but who, on the other hand, lacked financial means (relatively speaking, that is). These residents had come to this second community, which was at the time quite remote, and built their small homes there. The community was then "inundated" by nouveaux riches. I am here referring to the community of Zahala. And the very same thing happened to Ramat Motza near Jerusalem (university professors) and to other places as well.

Zahala's story is similar to that of Savyon. And the story of Jerusalem's Malha district is similar to that of Yahud. Oriental Jewish families were brought to Malha, which was then a remote community and lacked even a minimal level of comfort. They were housed in ruined Arab dwellings. These people slowly began to renovate their homes, to add rooms, to plant gardens, and, at a later stage - to build new homes. Today this once abandoned village, which was then in a state of deterioration, seems to be bursting at the seams because of the momentum of the self-initiated revitalization that has taken hold. The prices of ruined dwellings in Malha are rising astronomically. (The city's leaders are, of course, beginning to eye this area rather longingly. Do they want to give to the residents of Malha the same treatment that was given to the residents of Yemin Moshe? The Municipality uprooted the residents of Yemin Moshe, tossed them into giant apartment buildings and offered this charming neighborhood on a silver platter to millionaires. Does that story remind you of Naboth's vineyard (Kings I: 21) or the tale of the poor man's ewe (Samuel II: 12)?

In photo D we see the minaret of the mosque in Malha and, in its shadow, homes that have undergone a truly remarkable renovation and that boast well-tended gardens. There are even more luxurious dwellings in the eastern area of the village. However, I shall not show them to you; we have already seen what the villas in Yahud look like. I shall instead show you something that may be a little less impressive but that is much more thought-provoking. In photo E we see the gradual process of renovation in an Arab dwelling in Malha. The left-hand side of the house is made of stone; this is part of the original Arab house, which had been in a state of deterioration and which was the first section to be renovated. The middle part of the home is the first addition that was built. This part is stucco and not stone, because of the lack of financial means at the time. The right-hand side of the house represents

the most recent stage: As the outer layer of stone indicates, there has been an improvement in the family's economic situation. And to the right of this part of the house we see the garden - fenced off and well-tended.

Let's go inside and see what the quality of life is like in the household itself. Ask the head of the family whether he is happy. Ask him, when you get the chance, whether he would like to move to an apartment building and you will see how devoted these people are to their homes, which they have built themselves with great effort. They did all this without relying on plans that turned out to be complete failures and without inflationary budgets.

What can we learn from all this?

We can learn that the housing shortage in Israel stems not from objective factors, but from the existence of a total monopoly of all aspects of the building industry: a monopoly of land ownership by the Israel Lands Authority and a monopoly of the building industry per se by the Ministry of Housing and Construction and by the various private contractors. This stranglehold cannot be broken unless one is an Arab and the facts prove my case. If you are a new immigrant, you are doomed to rot in one of the country's immigrant absorption centers and then a government-built apartment.

The solution to the current housing crisis is simple: freedom. A little oxygen. Not a "thawing out" of land to contractors and not "build your own home" projects for the rich. But rather a granting of the request of the young couples in Jerusalem, for example, who have merely asked for a piece of land - and not for infrastructures or development projects - so that they can pitch their tents. From such tent encampments have sprung up communities such as Savyon, Yahu and Malha.

But the dinosaur will not relinquish its monopoly.

An American social critic has written that modern leftism supports the theory of the centralization of power by the state. Thus intellectuals have historically leaned towards state socialism and Leninism. Intellectuals always want to lead society through the exertion of the power that is in the hands of the State. However, as the political success of intellectuals becomes greater, the importance of the state increases. Then, one hears of the need for "domestic reform," although the means applied in order to achieve this reform typically become more and more regressive in nature.

Who wrote this? Milton Friedman? Not by a long shot. The author of these lines is the leftist's leftist, Noam Chomsky. Without foresaking his leftist views, he sees a common denominator in Leninism and Mussolinism: concentration of power in the hands of the State. The principle of the dinosaur whose stranglehold hits everyone.

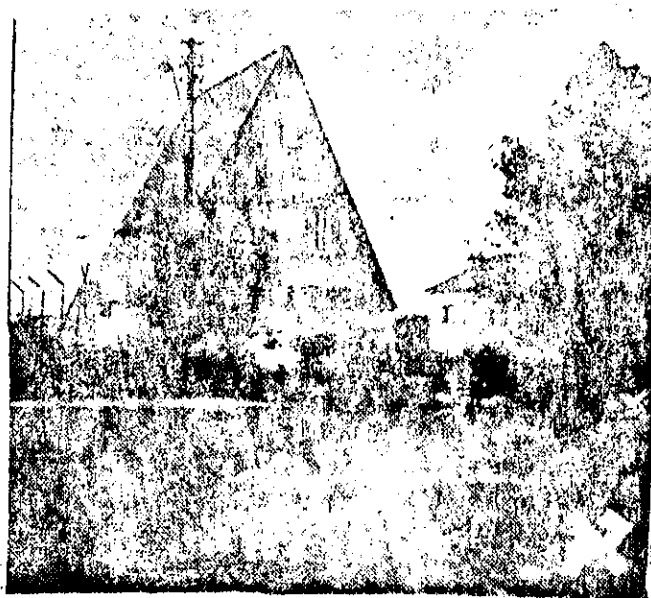
The strength of the contractors and the strength of habit

This principle has not been abandoned by the Likud Government, God forbid. First of all, once centralism has begun to spread, it is difficult to eradicate. Secondly, the monopoly is convenient not only for the bureaucracy, but also for the contractors. As a powerful lobby, the contractors manage to acquire plots of land here and there and to thereby squeeze Mr. and Mrs. Average Citizen dry. If the Hatzav members are given land, the dinosaur will suffer a loss of strength and the contractors will also suffer a loss - a financial loss, that is.

Up to this point, I have limited myself to making a very general proposal - a plea for oxygen. It is quite clear that oxygen is not enough. I have only voiced a slogan. Implementation is a far more complicated task.

In my next article I shall try to transform this slogan into a feasible plan of action. For such a plan has already been carried out hundreds of times in the history of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and has attained an incredibly high level of success.

Moshe Hazani is one of the founding Fellows of the Jerusalem Institute for Federal Studies and teaches Sociology at Bar-Ilan University. From its inception he has been interested in Project Renewal and its ramifications.



A
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B
↓

C
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D
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