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KIRYAT SHMONA: A LOOK FROM THE INSIDE*

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Kiryat Shmona, Israel's far north development town located in close proximity to the Lebanese border, usually attracts outside attention only after it is shelled or infiltrated by the PLO. Alternatively, "missions" of Diaspora Jews are brought through the town to show them a microcosm of Israel's social problems. This year Center for Jewish Community Studies Fellow Eliezer Schweid, Professor of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University, is spending his university leave in Kiryat Shmona teaching at Tel-Hai Regional College and in the city itself. We are pleased to present his first impressions which should help to put Kiryat Shmona into better perspective.

The Editors

The mass media have given Kiryat Shmona an image well removed from reality. Kiryat Shmona has a socially distressed population, the shelling on the other side of the border does not make life very pleasant and a great deal of tension can be felt. However, these are neither the only, nor even, the major aspects of life in the town. When one lives there and comes in daily contact with the local residents, one encounters a very different picture - a positive, perhaps even very positive, picture.

Let us start off with external appearances. A quick drive on the main highway that cuts the town in half or perhaps a very brief stopover in the shopping center for something to drink, might lead one to view Kiryat Shmona as a lusterless and unexciting town with undistinguished rows of apartment buildings. In fact, however, Kiryat Shmona is a very pretty town. Residential streets skirt the bottom of one side of the mountain that ascends above a breathtaking view of the Hula Valley and Mount Hermon, while the valley's springs flow along the length of the other side.

*Translated by Zvi Shapira

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Both streets and springs are adorned with trees and gardens. One can see an abundance of greenery, of flowers, and of well-equipped playgrounds. It is pleasant to walk along Kiryat Shmona's streets at any time of the day. With the exception of the main highway, these streets do not have much heavy traffic. The atmosphere is relaxed. One can hear the voices of children and one can also hear the birds sing. The mountain views and the contrasting Hula Valley can be seen on all sides as one takes a walk among the city's apartment buildings, not all of which are drab, uniform housing project units.

One can speak in similar terms of the "human scenery." One is favorably impressed right from the start. How does the "average citizen," the passenger on the bus, the sales clerk or the office clerk act? Any person who wants to apply the criteria gained from bitter experiences in the towns of the country's central district will be pleasantly surprised. He will note a considerable decrease in the atmospheric pressure on his nervous system. Not because of greater efficiency, but rather because of the different type of reception that he encounters here. People here, even total strangers, say "Good morning" to one another. People take an interest in visitors, welcome new residents, are always ready to offer a helping hand, and always listen patiently. It must be said here that this type of behavior is, or should be, an integral part of human relationships, a basic part. However, when one compares the atmosphere of Israel's big cities with the atmosphere of initial contacts with Kiryat Shmona's residents, one feels as if he has returned to a remote, rarely encountered and practically forgotten "landscape of life."

Another impression of the human landscape: Kiryat Shmona's population is young. The percentage of children and youth is high. One sees them a great deal on the streets, in the many schools and in public places. It surely cannot be said that these youths display an inhibited or introverted pattern of behavior or that they are endowed with exquisite manners. Nonetheless, their behavior is more pleasant than that of their peers in the cities of central Israel. Kiryat Shmona's youth are not openly boisterous or rowdy. The better upbringing provided the children of more established families is felt both in school and on the street, and youthful activities do not infringe upon areas of adult activity. I have attempted with these randomly presented comments to delineate the general atmosphere, which serves as a backdrop to the city's cultural life.

Despite everything that has been noted above, the basic tenor of the residents' feelings reflects a low level of self-esteem. They regard themselves as deprived and this deprivation is a direct result of their living in a small town far removed

from the large urban centers. The residents feel that their educational institutions, which they deem to be inadequate, are unable to provide pupils with a reasonable chance to compete at the university level with urban youths or, even for that matter, with youths from neighboring kibbutzim. The residents feel that they are rarely exposed to the delights of high-caliber artistic work in such areas as theater, music, or painting, and that they are afforded little opportunity to develop spiritually. The big cities have an abundance of high-quality, brilliant artistry. Kiryat Shmona is a provincial town.

These complaints are generally accompanied by the expectation of outside help, in the form of budget allocations and volunteer assistance. Why have people forgotten Kiryat Shmona? Why are there no attempts to compensate Kiryat Shmona for its sacrifices? One should be careful to point out that this line of thinking is not totally negative; it embodies a strong urge towards self-advancement and is especially felt in the field of education. The parents consider their childrens' education to be very important and are willing to invest a great deal towards it. The children identify with their parents. The willingness to learn and self-discipline in one's studies can be felt in all aspects of school life. In this respect, educational institutions in Kiryat Shmona have a certain advantage.

However, it is clear that, from a general standpoint, this low self-esteem is an unhealthy attitude which encourages dropping out or a reliance on the activities of others. Here again we see a remarkable paradox. The low level of self-esteem does not match the reality. A small town cannot, of course, offer its residents the same wide variety of cultural pleasures that a large city can afford to offer, and this limitation is especially felt by people who desire to engage in creative cultural activity. On the other hand, the level of education in Kiryat Shmona's elementary and secondary schools compares favorably with that of schools in the country's central regions. There are indeed schools in Kiryat Shmona which compare favorably with top-level schools in Jerusalem or Tel-Aviv, from both scholastic and cultural standpoints. Despite a lack of a wide variety of alternatives, here one can much more easily utilize available opportunities. From time to time shows that are seen by audiences throughout Israel come to Kiryat Shmona and anyone who is interested can be pleasantly entertained.

On the whole, Kiryat Shmona residents who are interested--and there are many--see more theater and hear more music than their socio-economic counterparts in the cities of the country's central district. In addition, Kiryat Shmona benefits from the volunteer spirit that is very prevalent in Israel. A considerable portion of volunteer activity is devoted to the development of all the various fields of cultural creativity. Thus, it would seem that the low level of self-esteem actually stems from the residents' inclination to be on the receiving end of things. Kiryat Shmona's main problem may be in fact to change this attitude.

What are the main centers of cultural activity at present? First of all, the schools. It should be stressed here that the town's schools, especially the comprehensive secondary schools (a state-run general school and a state-run religious school) do not serve only as educational facilities. Many different cultural activities are initiated by the student councils and supported by the schools. These activities involve the participation of numerous teachers and also involve the participation of the students' parents. In addition, activities are conducted by the General Students' Council in Kiryat Shmona; these activities are aimed at coordinating the activities of volunteer youth from various agencies who work in Kiryat Shmona and are also aimed at encouraging joint activities and encounters among these volunteers. The town also has a branch of the Scouts Movement active, not only in the recreational and social spheres, but also in community services, especially with regard to the strengthening of the activities of the local Magen David Adom headquarters.

A second focus of social and cultural activities is the Edelstein Community Center, with its quite adequate public library, which circulates most Hebrew literary works on a regular basis. The Community Center operates several study groups in political affairs, ecology, and the arts. The center also takes an active role in bringing top-quality cultural events to Kiryat Shmona: plays, musical events and exhibitions. (The Center recently sponsored a pantomime festival and an impressive exhibit of kinetic art.)

The third center of social and cultural activities is the Regional College at Tel-Hai, situated some two kilometers from Kiryat Shmona which offers opportunities for post-secondary education. The college offers an academic curriculum sponsored by the University of Haifa and a practical engineering curriculum sponsored by the Technion. The college has an arts center (painting, sculpture, ceramics, jewelry manufacture, etc.), and a center for adult education and Judaic studies. Hundreds of students are enrolled, but the most surprising fact is that the majority of them come from the surrounding kibbutzim and moshavim (rural co-operative settlements). Few Kiryat Shmona residents avail themselves of the college's facilities, for reasons not yet clear to me. There are, on the other hand, other post-secondary activities in Kiryat Shmona itself: School of Graphic Arts and various short-term projects, such as annual in-service training in creative drama for teachers or a series of lectures sponsored by the Ben-Zvi Memorial Institute. However, none of these activities can compete with the courses offered at the college.

A fourth focus includes the local Religious Council and the town's synagogues. Kiryat Shmona has many synagogues, most of them following Oriental liturgies (Persian, Iraqi, Kurdish, Yemenite, etc.). In fact, one can see an interesting process

whereby different liturgical styles meet and intermingle and an even more interesting revival of religious experience as the nucleus for independent cultural expression and as a nucleus for social life. The older generation of "Oriental" Jews now increasingly tends to be drawn to the synagogue and to a revival of previously abandoned religious patterns. This revival stems from both love and communal pride. Efforts are made to involve the younger generation through active participation in prayer services and through study groups. It is still too early to properly assess the achievements arrived at through this process; however, a pleasant communal atmosphere is definitely being established. In other words, social, as well as religious, life is involved here. It should be noted in this connection that the unique family ethos of Oriental Jews has been preserved in Kiryat Shmona to a greater extent than in the cities of Israel's central regions. The warm interpersonal relationships that I encountered on my arrival here seem to radiate from this ethos, in which good-hearted hospitality is a central value.

One could add up these observations and arrive at a very positive evaluation. However, the self-image of Kiryat Shmona's residents is not positive. The awareness of being dependent and the expectation that others will offer assistance can be strongly felt. Why does this negative self-image persist? Most Kiryat Shmona residents tend to point to a single important factor: the town's current leadership. The often-voiced argument is that this leadership is concerned only with its own interests but that there is no alternative leadership. One does get the feeling that this is not a totally groundless contention. In other words, one gets the feeling that the town's leaders want to perpetuate Kiryat Shmona's image as a needy town that requires outside help in order to continue to exist.

Many people have left Kiryat Shmona and many of these former residents have achieved distinction in various fields. If a considerable number of them had remained, the town's cultural activities could rely on local talent and residents could take pride in their town. This has not happened for a very simple reason: Kiryat Shmona does not offer a basis for development in any cultural field. Even the Regional College relies on teachers who are not local residents. A recent activity of considerable interest was the work of director Nola Chilton and a group of young actors from the Haifa Theatre. This activity generated great interest, as well as considerable controversy, because, after its considerable "involvement," the group did not remain in Kiryat Shmona but did succeed in leaving behind both a feeling of frustration stemming from a lack of follow-through and guilt feelings in the actors themselves. Nonetheless, the actors had no choice; they simply could not develop professionally in Kiryat Shmona. The local leadership urges people to come, but does not provide an infrastructure that can absorb new arrivals.

The pattern of action of the town's leadership has, of course, deeply rooted origins. This pattern is a continuation of the paternalistic attitude displayed by the state and national agencies which settled and developed the town. These agencies encouraged a certain type of leadership and implanted in the population attitudes that did not encourage the development of an alternative form of leadership. Individuals who were willing to set up an alternative leadership were simply not integrated; the town's leadership was not interested in such individuals. This problem seems to be the main issue holding back development and seems to be a vicious circle.

Let us sum up our observations. Kiryat Shmona's population has very great potential, and the groundwork for several admirable projects has already been laid. It is now necessary to erect structures on this groundwork. Kiryat Shmona must pass from its state of dependent childhood to full, independent maturity. Kiryat Shmona needs teachers who will stay on permanently, a college that can rely on local human resources, a small theater group of its own, an orchestra (even if only a chamber orchestra) of its own, and so on. If an independent base can be established, people will be attracted to Kiryat Shmona and will discover the advantage of living in the unique atmosphere of a frontier town. The residents' self-image will then change and the people of Kiryat Shmona will learn to evaluate themselves in the proper light.

The key to this change is to be found among the younger generation that has grown up in the town, although the central agencies dealing with the town's affairs cannot be exempted from responsibility. The paternalistic attitude must be replaced by one that demands greater involvement and responsibility on the part of local residents as far as the town's cultural life is concerned. The residents of Kiryat Shmona deserve to be treated in this manner and are capable of taking on such involvement and such responsibility.