

The Clearing

It was the promise that the trees will soon be strong enough for climbing that kept me looking forward to my family's picnics. This was back during the short hiatus that separated the traumas of World War II from the violence that saw the birth of Israel in 1948. The promise was a lie, of course, though as a child I did not know it yet. There were other lies, too, for me to learn about, though that came later, much later.

The young pine forests of my childhood, always pines, seemed forever slim and pliable, barely speckling the landscape with their meager shade. They were nothing like the dense, self-sown growths that cover huge swaths of North America, or its harvested wastelands where amputated stumps jut out of the earth like rotting teeth. Our soft Aleppo pines were not planted for harvesting. They were to reverse erosion, we were told at school; they were to make the desert bloom, we believed. That they were planted on Palestinian lands remained untold. Mere saplings at the time, I see them still as tenuously rooted in the dry, crumbling red clay of our stony mountains, kept upright by wooden crutch-supports, waiting to grow the green fuzz that will eventually blanket much of Israel's eroded land. . . .

By the time I was born, in 1938, our Jewish pioneers had already drained the swamps. They were redeeming the land, and we school children, from kindergarten on up, were to help with that redemption. The forests we are planting would reverse centuries of misuse, our teachers explained, the legacy of marauding armies and Arab neglect. Every classroom had a collecting box where on Friday, every Friday, we'd line up to deposit a coin brought from home—our gift to the Jewish National Fund's greening of the land. And every Tu Bishvat, the New Year of the Trees, we'd file out of the schoolyard, each child holding a small paper cup where a tiny seedling sat gingerly in a fistful of damp dirt, singing the "Planters' Song":

That's how the planters walk,
With a song in the heart, and a spade in hand,
From cities and from the villages,
In Tu Bishva'at, in Tu Bishvat.

We were doing our bit for the Hebrew state, yet to be born. One day, we knew, our saplings would give shade. The thirsty, barren, rocky hills would soon look like Europe, we imagined, like Romania perhaps, or like the forests drawn in our picture books—a verdant place where red polka-dotted toadstools grow in moist brown earth, where witches live in

candy houses, and wolves converse with little girls who bring food in pretty baskets to their grandmothers.

My family had just moved from the small village of Herzeliyah to a new house in what was, on a city planner's map, north Tel Aviv. Our house, solitary and treeless, stood in the empty area destined to become the city center. During that between-wars hiatus it was a lone sentinel, facing the Palestinian village of Summayel, whose farmers would sow and reap their wheat and barley just outside our fence. Camel caravans would pass by, carrying sand for new Jewish construction somewhere beyond the horizon, while in near-by Tel Aviv—"The First Hebrew City" as we proudly called it—the grinding noise of cement mixers and construction dust filled the air.

At age seven, eight, and even nine, I yearned for the ficus trees of Herzeliyah that our gaggle of neighborhood children used to climb. The forests offered no substitute. Their pine trees were too scraggy, their brittle limbs too high, their bark too scratchy, and their needles too prickly. They could never match the satin-smooth skin, strong limbs, and thick, leathery leaves of a sturdy ficus. Impatient for the new plantings to mature, I nonetheless looked forward to these day trips, when we'd picnic

among the newly planted pines we called a “forest,” pretending that the dry hot air that singed our nostrils was a refreshing breeze and that the skinny young trees that clung so precariously to the parched earth were already providing us with a shady canopy. . . .

Though nothing much happened on those family outings, there were sequels—national sequels whose plots insinuate themselves into the familial one. They concern my country’s myth of becoming: the myth of “redeeming the wilderness” and “making the desert bloom.”

Over the decades, larger patches of Israel’s eroded lands turned green. Seen through the window of a speeding car, the green pleases the eye. There’s a gratifying sense of recovery, so visible where the lush green comes to an abrupt end as it abuts eroded land. And yet within this satisfaction lurks doubt, not about the rare instance of a forest mistakenly planted on drought-ridden soil, but the sense, perhaps subliminal, that there is something unnatural about this arboreal carpet. It may be the clearly drawn line that separates the forest’s green from the brown-gray earth, but it may also be the uniform planting, so clear when one stands among this multitude of Aleppo pines. They are all of an age, all of them spaced at regular intervals, planted with an unswerving, machine-like

determination: another and another and another.

This determination inspired but also puzzled me. It was as if a barely audible whisper urged me to wonder about this relentless afforestation. It was only decades later that I finally learned that planting these standard-issue forests had to do with much more than the proverbial redemption of the land. . . .