

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 21
Reflections from Israel

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203 blvd. Raspail
Paris, 14e

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

"We are developing successfully, so we can help the Africans to do it... We are also a poor country with arid land... We are small and have to develop without the massive means of the big industrial powers... We too were under colonial rule... We are a nation of eighty tribes (the nations the Israelis came from) and we have our own underdeveloped people (the Oriental Jews)... We are not in the Cold War..."

So runs the usual Israeli rationale for Israel's modest program of aid to Africa. Last year more than 1,000 Africans came to Israel to study, usually for three to six months, and about 400 Israelis went to Africa on aid missions. The primary motive of Israel's aid to Africa is of course political: to counterbalance the hostility of the Arabs. In this, the Israelis have been successful. Israel has diplomatic relations with almost all of Black Africa, including the Moslem states of West Africa below the Sahara. Even Mali, geographically and politically close to Arab North Africa and overwhelmingly Moslem, has ties to Israel. (Incidentally, this is one more indication that the current advance of Islam in Black Africa does not bring with it a rise in Arab influence.) An indication of Israel's popularity with Africans is the opinion survey of African students in France carried out two years ago by Jean-Pierre N'Diaye. Israel was rated third by the students (after Russia and China) in answer to the question: "What nation do you most admire?"

A visitor arriving in Israel after many months in Africa also finds much to admire in this little nation. And what he finds here underlines in many cases what is lacking today in Africa. The story of Israel's development is too well known to need repetition, so I will limit myself to those impressions that are particularly relevant to Africa:

Beersheba. Thousands of immigrants have been settled in this raw and ugly frontier city. All are housed, there is work for all. No shantytowns housing masses of unemployed.

Jerusalem. Government offices still in modest temporary quarters, while the effort goes to housing. No palaces. Housing has priority over government: the opposite is true in Africa.

Kibbutz Maabaroth. This 30-year-old kibbutz (collective farm settlement) has been more cautious, and therefore slower in its expansion, than its neighbors. Yet in the past decade Maabaroth has tripled its agricultural production while using less labor. Now, with its surplus labor and

the capital it has accumulated, Maabaroth is starting small industrial projects. Maabaroth's surplus is sufficient also to raise its members' standard of living and to contribute to financing new kibbutzim for immigrants. Here, in microcosm, is the agricultural revolution that precedes and makes possible the industrial revolution.

The land. Reforested hills and irrigated valleys, implanted in arid semi-desert, are evidence that Israel is rebuilding its land and adding to its agricultural capital. Most of Africa is consuming its fertile land rather than adding to it.

Austerity. "The young people of today are spoiled," announced a mother, about 35, who was brought up in France. "When I was in a kibbutz, we had only one dress: when a girl was going to town, she got to wear it. Now every girl wants her own dress!"

Equality. Johanan Saadia, who teaches African students at the Afro-Asian Institute, says: "I point out to my students that salary differentials in the Soviet Union and the United States are at least four times as great as they are in Israel. 'So who's a socialist?' I ask them. I let them figure out for themselves that those differences are much higher still in their own countries."

Use of aid. Both Israel and Africa have received a great deal of foreign capital of one kind or another. Israel has absorbed what it received usefully; Africa in many cases has not. Everything is in use in Israel; abandoned machines and half-finished buildings are frequent sights in Africa.

These comparisons being favorable to Israel, it would seem that there is much Africa can learn from the Israelis. In Africa itself, the most interesting Israeli operation is military-agricultural training for youth. This program, which we found underway in the Ivory Coast, Togo and Dahomey, provides army draftees with basic agricultural training on state farms. Obviously Israel has pressing military reasons, which do not exist in Africa, for giving its youth this sort of training. Questioned about this, Israelis in Africa are likely to say that the Africans are going to be drafted into the army anyhow and they might as well learn something useful at the same time. Mali, which runs a similar program without Israeli help, has already run up against one difficulty: almost half the first class of trainees prefer staying in the army to going back to the villages they came from. And, of course, the army does not play the same role in elite-ruled Africa as it does in democratic Israel. Dahomey is proposing to introduce universal military service, for boys and girls as well, who will serve in the army and the police. It does not require a great leap of the imagination to see these youths being used to herd peasants onto the recently created collective fields (see DH-18) much as Stalin used students to enforce collectivization in the 1930's.

In Israel, Africans are usually offered short and intensive

periods of training. The Israelis believe, as one official put it, that students too long away from home are less useful when they go back, and that homesickness and idleness are partly responsible for the trouble African students have had abroad. As a result, Israel takes few university students, but many for three to six months of vocational study, especially in agriculture, cooperation, and trade unionism. They are kept busy with both study and organized recreation. Their stay in Israel usually includes a stretch of work at a kibbutz.

His confrontation with kibbutz life is likely to be pretty startling to the African student. He is, after all, a member of a tiny elite in a society where manual labor is the badge of servitude, whereas the kibbutz is rigidly egalitarian. Mrs. Tom M'Boya of Kenya reported her surprise at seeing the cabinet minister who invited her to his kibbutz get up to take his turn at washing the dishes. "Imagine, a minister washing dishes!" she commented. On one occasion, according to a report current in Europe, the Africans in a group of foreign students refused to do any manual work on the kibbutz. (The Israelis I asked about this story said they had not heard it.) How, I asked Gershon Fradkin, director of foreign training in the Ministry of Agriculture, do African students react to working on the kibbutz? "They hate it," he said. "At least at first. But their attitude tends to change when they see that the Israeli farmer is at least as educated as they are, and that he lives decently and has a library full of books."

Fradkin's main criticism of African agricultural students was of their tendency to reject small cheap methods and think in terms of million-dollar projects (a line of thought common in both African and colonial governments). Fradkin also found the students likely to shy away from responsibility for fear of making mistakes. Saadia, the instructor at the Afro-Asian Institute in Tel-Aviv, commented that it takes him some weeks to overcome the students' initial mistrust, particularly in the case of students from ex-British Africa, whom he has found to have more "racial complexes" than those from French-speaking Africa. The latter "know more about French than African literature... Within two minutes you can find a subject of common interest... But the students from British Africa often feel they are uneducated and so they are reluctant to talk..."

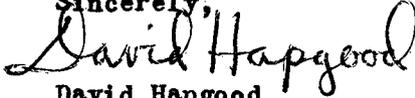
With a crowded curriculum - eighty subjects are touched on in three months - the Institute's courses are designed less to teach professional competence and more, in Saadia's words, to "teach leadership and create a desire for knowledge." In the field of agriculture, Israel can display useful and inexpensive techniques and a unique range of forms of social organization, from the kibbutz through the various

forms of cooperative settlement known as moshavim to purely private ownership and operation.

What do the African students take back to their continent from Israel? In some cases, just a diploma and the prestige of travel, which is what they came for. Israeli officials collect lyrical letters from their former students, but these read like bread-and-butter letters in most cases. Certainly Africans who have been to Israel speak in glowing terms of their experience, and the Israeli impact on Africa has in some ways been remarkable. Riding through the bush in Dahomey, the local director of agriculture remarked: "Here we're planning to start a kibbutz. But in the long run I think the moshav is more adaptable to our country." The terms were so much a part of his vocabulary that he did not think of explaining them. All this polishes the Israeli image in Africa, but it does not necessarily do Africa any good. For, after his brief experience, the African student returns to an environment which, as I have suggested in other newsletters, does not encourage the very qualities the Israelis try to teach.

But this much must be said for the Israeli effort: unlike much else that is offered in the way of education and aid, it probably does not do Africa any harm.

This traveler left Israel disagreeing with the Israeli thesis stated at the beginning of this newsletter. Israel is carrying out the professed goals of most African nations: economic development and 'socialism' (defined variously or not at all). But - to take one example - Israeli agriculture is progressing rapidly in all the nation's varied forms of settlement, whereas African agriculture is stagnating: is adopting one or another Israeli method likely to do Africa any good? Israel's success is rooted, not in any particular techniques, but in the dynamic quality of Israeli society. It seems hardly likely that anything being done today - for that matter, anything that could be done from the outside - will make a similar dynamism take root in Africa. I do not mean that it will not happen in Africa - indeed, there are encouraging signs here and there - but when it does happen, when Africa takes off, it will be for African not foreign reasons.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood