

Dr. Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon, son of Yitzhak Ben Aharon, is preparing a new social revolution

Revolutionary Son of a Revolutionary

Born on a Kibbutz, he left at a young age, went to work with drug-addicted youth and tried it also ■ He entered the academy at the age of 35, and did a Ph.D. without a matriculation certificate ■ He founded an alternative Kibbutz, went to America, came back and founded ICS: A movement whose aim is to create a civil power equal to the political and economic powers ■ In the meantime the seeds of the revolution are planted in conferences and through the Internet, but Dr. Ben-Aharon is convinced: Even if it takes awhile, it will surely come

By Yael Gvirtz

It is difficult to be a modern revolutionary; especially in Israel, with the current reality. Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon, who has been touring Israel for the last year and a half, lecturing about a new idea for a social revolution, comes up daily against this general atmosphere, where no utopian idea can manage to stand up to a bus blowing up in the air.

Try and persuade the Israelites that they need a revolution right now, and moreover, a revolution geared at the long run and not one that will provide them with fast solutions. When everything is being shattered down before one's eyes, when the general atmosphere is of being "after the deluge", when the stomach is turning inside out, the last thing one wishes to hear of is revolutions. Certainly not in summertime, maybe after the holidays. But Ben-Aharon insists that now is just the right time. "My father's revolutionary generation was also ridiculed, at the beginning of the previous century when, in the midst of the collapse of the old world, they talked about the vision of settling in Israel and establishing a Jewish state", he explains. "Then, too, people did not want to listen and did not believe it was possible. Practical people laughed at them then, just like they would laugh at me today. I am not taken aback by this and I am convinced of success."

The "Chaos" that exists today, in all governing and social systems in Israel and the world, does not scare him, on the contrary. Strengthened by his academic studies in the exact sciences and philosophy of science, he considers himself an expert on this issue: "In chaos I feel most at home. It is the base for my world conception. I see in it a state of permanent

creation: On the one hand I weep with those who moan over a world that has been destroyed and is no more - and on the other hand I see, in the chaos that ensues, the same amazing potentials that today's physics and biology see in it: A galaxy being born, a chaotic state taking on a new form; Mist turning into a crystal. Disintegration that brings forth a new formation and structure."

The World crisis and the distress that Israelis are going through, according to Ben-Aharon, derive from an ever-increasing war of civilizations, religious fundamentalism, strengthening of western economic

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imperialism, and weakening of the democratic state. A three-fold breakdown: Religious-cultural, democratic-constitutional, economic-social. Out of this disintegration there will grow, he is convinced, a social revolution that will fundamentally change the social order in Israel and worldwide.

To this end he has founded, together with Jewish and Arab partners, a movement for the establishment of a strong civil society in Israel. A third power, equal to the existing political and economical powers. A social change that will come 'from below', from the citizens. "The centralized-political rule of the state", he explains, "has failed to implement the three social values underlying modern democracy: Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. In order to realize

these, a new system of social balance is required, that will ensure freedom of expression and cultivation of the individual's unique personality in the cultural-spiritual sphere, equality of human value and social rights in the political-democratic sphere, and fraternity and solidarity in the economical sphere. If we established such a threefold model, we shall be able to integrate these values into the three social sectors."

On Thursday, a week ago, the movement held a conference at the Scouts' Center in the Arabic city of Shepharam. For four hours, with no air-conditioning, with the main street's outside noise almost drowning their words, a lively discussion was held by about a hundred activists and interested visitors - religious and secular Jews, secular, Muslim and Christian Arabs, Russian emigrants, young and old - about the question: How does one turn these theories into practice? It is not about founding another political party, but about establishing civil councils that will operate in each locality, whether in local municipalities, cities, or on the national sphere, that will intervene with and influence political and economical decisions taken there. The first model, a citizens' council in the Galilee, is being established these days and is intended to operate there vis-a-vis the municipal authorities. In the meantime, ideas are being sown, especially in conferences and via the Internet. The chance of importing these global conceptions of civil institutions of influence from the western world into the political and war-like reality of Israel - seems rather slim now. However, Ben-Aharon is convinced that within twenty years we shall see this revolution being implemented. An eternity, in Israeli conception.

Few revolutionaries, like his 96 years old father, Yitzhak Ben-Aharon

of Kibbutz Givat-Ha'yim (meaning: mount of life), one of the founders of the Labor and Kibbutz Movement, have survived the revolution that they generated at the time, as it died in front of them while they were still at the heights of their statue. From his mountain, from the 'vale of tears' of the Kibbutz Movement and the social chaos that engulfs Israel's political and social life, he watches with hope over his youngest son who won't give up and insists on starting a social revolution of his own.

From the Galilee to the Philippines and back

Dr. Yeshayahu Ben-Aharon, 47, the founder of the alternative Kibbutz Harduf, is accustomed to operate there where doors are slammed. A born leader, who always prefers to operate outside the conventional frameworks. The type of person who says about his previous social experiences: "How lucky am I to be an orphan, for now I can restart all over again." A saying typical, by the way, of his father, as well.

To academic studies he arrived only at the age of 35, after having been accepted directly to studies toward second and third degree in Haifa University, having no matriculation certificate. From an early age he has been an adventurous stormy individual, an autodidact, who walked to the edge of consciousness, and more than once into perilous places, searching for new experiences, always quitting the frameworks where he had been living or operating the moments he felt they had stopped contributing to his development.

Though he had been a brilliant student, he left his studies and his Kibbutz in tenth grade, and went to work with drug-addicted youth in a poor

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neighborhood in the upper Galilee. He experienced drugs himself, and enrolled into the army a short while before Yom-Kippur (Attunement day) war, at once into the big crush. “A formative experience, a lesson about the limits of the power of the State of Israel, that woke me up for the first time to political and social issues.” He joined a spiritual community in the far north of Scotland, and left it after a year in order to examine the possibility of founding a new community in Israel. “In every transformation I went through”, he testifies about himself, “A strong intuition of knowing the way has always guided me. I always stopped when the impressions faded and I had exhausted the experience.”

His next experience was in founding a Kibbutz of a novel conception. Just when the Kibbutz Movement was declining into dismantling and privatization, he regarded this collapse as an opportunity for a change from within. With a minimal core of people, including his wife Addira, “Harduf” - the last Kibbutz founded by the United Kibbutz Movement, settled on a bare hill. A synthesis of streams and ideas in search of the alternative: in education, medicine, agriculture, and so on. For 20 years he dedicated himself to building up the new community - and just when the fruits were ripening, he felt he had nothing else to do there.

In 1998 he left for studies in the USA with Addira and their two children. Two years later he returned to Israel, for the time being without his wife, who had stayed there to complete her studies. Since then he has been a single full-time father, making a living as a favorite lecturer on scientific and spiritual themes in private circles, and works voluntarily as an active revolutionary.

The idea for the social revolution was born from an invitation he had received, before he left for the States, to give a lecture in an international conference organized by Nicanor Perlas in the Philippines, dealing with globalization and the civil society. At the convention in Manila he was exposed to the ideas and activities of the civil society, reaching then the peak of its preparations for the demonstrations, which devastated the celebrations of the World Trade convention in Seattle. “From a condition of a complete cut-off with the State of Israel, I touched once more the pulse of life”, he tells enthusiastically. “At the most unexpected place I rediscov-



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ered moral responsibility for planet Earth, for the weak and the oppressed, that once was the torch leading the Labor movement in Israel and elsewhere, and since then has been wholly extinguished.”

Upon his return to Israel he started to roll the idea. From scratch, like the boulders in Harduf at the time. “Then, too, I started with three people, and everyone was skeptical. But people joined in, and my vision came true.” This time he did not find in Harduf partners for one more revolution, except for one, a businessman devoted to advance social initiatives, Eyal Ziegelman, his first partner at ICS. To Givat H’ayim, the Kibbutz where he was born, he did not even bother to suggest the revolutionary message. “To approach a society that lives the ‘good life’ or whose difficulties do not turn in our direction, is a waste of time”, he explains. “I prefer to turn to places where the issues of discrimination,

exploitation and poverty are ‘burning in the bone mark’ of the people operating there.”

The vision of the Silk Revolution

Ben-Aharon is not the type to let terror-acts and skepticism confuse him. Everything is aflame around him, but for him there is nothing burning. “A revolution”, he insists, “does not happen overnight.” “This vision will be realized”, he is convinced, “only when it has become a question of life and death for Israeli society.”

- How does one carry out a Silk Revolution in a state used to violence?

“This is a revolution in cognition and consciousness. In order to create a deep change of society, the understanding of the simple citizens is required. There are neither sensations

nor instant solutions here; it is not about founding a political party. It is not about the politics of parties, but about the original sense of politics, about reshaping social life into a three-fold organism. Everywhere in the world where strong civil institutions are operating, a social revolution is generated. Wherever we find three negotiators seated around the social table and not just two - the politician and the capitalist, who to all intents and purposes are one and the same - this is a total revolution. If the civil voice understands its power and affects democracy and economics, then we shall be in a different story altogether.”

- There are hundreds of organizations that are socially active.

“This is true, but a civil society as a third member, a third sector - threefolding - is entirely new. The state committed itself to provide

equality, freedom and solidarity, but in practice it is a bunch of empty words. It implements equality where freedom is called for, freedom - where equality is required, and fraternity has been altogether trashed to the garbage.”

- Israel is torn apart today. There are new immigrants, the religious, Arabs, Orientals, Ashkenazies, what not. How can state copes successfully, according to your conception, with so many opposed needs?

“This is just the point. Today we have here in Israel 7 cultural communities that are spiritually different. We are dealing with a diversified mixture of beliefs and cultures, different from or opposed to each other. Under such conditions, it is the duty of the state to provide each citizen with an equal social “basket” that guarantees equal opportunities, and leave it up to each of them to realize social and cultural autonomy according to its own aspirations and needs. Political pressure groups - ultra-religious, religious, Kibbutz-movements - have been granted autonomic education systems, but an ordinary citizen who would like to create a school that suits him, struggles to no avail with the governmental Bolshevik that happened to site there. When a significant civil power will stand behind

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him to support him in the struggle with the decision makers, it will not be possible to ignore him any longer.”

‘Capitalistan’ versus ‘Islamistan’

His point of departure toward the prolonged crisis in Israel and the world, is the theory of ‘clash of civilizations’ which defines the need of a ‘worthy enemy’ as a strategic asset of the first order for the existence of Empires. “The original sin of Jewish and Palestinians leaderships”, he claims, “is their identifying with the clash of civilizations in its classical version. The Jewish leaderships, on the left and on the right, regarding itself as part of the western empire, or ‘Capitalistan’, poses itself automatically against ‘Islamistan’, while the Palestin-

ian do the same from the opposite direction. Each of the three religions has its own messianic solution for Israel, their holy land, intended to kill all the others and complete the destruction. And on this ‘Bloody Fault-Lines’ in Samuel Huntington’s charming phrase, we and our children, Jewish and Arabs, are being sacrificed.”

- Both peoples are being murdered here, and you claim nobody wishes to solve the conflict?

“The only thing common today to Israelis and Palestinians. including terrorist organizations, is whole heartily ‘NO’ to a Palestinian state. If the Palestinians really wanted a state, it would already be founded and thriving, since 1948 already. But for the Palestinian leadership there is nothing more appalling than the idea of Israel disappearing one day from the Territories and leaving it to them to care for the needs of the Palestinian people. And if the Israelis wanted a Palestinian state it would have come into being long ago. Each party could have founded it unilaterally, without complicated agreements, such as the Oslo disaster. If the Americans wanted it, there would be an agreement tomorrow morning, as in each morning in the last 35 years since the six-day war, but they are apparently interested in an eternal state of war. They have supported, in various ways, the ever increased blood-shed here, like in Bosnia in the 90’, with the end result of “divide and rule”: Until an inner division of the land of Israel, probably also later the state of Israel itself, will become “obligatory for humanitarian reasons”, with ethnical separatism and western proconsuls to govern the barbarian natives, that cannot live peacefully together, as the western nations achieved so superbly in Bosnia.”

- What do you have to offer to Arabs in Israel and in the Territories that has not been offered before?

“A new strategic partnership. We do not speak to them anymore about co-existence, sharing a plate of humus, or building a ‘mansion of peace’. All this is long ago ‘passé’. We say to them: You, the Arab-Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel, and your civil society organizations, are searching for alternatives for this fundamentalist, imperialistic murderous Islam. And we, the Jews, are looking to our alternatives for the global elite exploitation. For the existence of Israel as a democratic state, and for the benefit of all peoples who live here, it is necessary to single out and isolate our real common interests and act together.”

- Among Israeli Arabs those voices demanding a bi-national state are getting louder.

“This is a natural response to the enhancing of the ethnic-Jewish character of Israel and turning it into an apparent democracy. The Arabic citi-

zen, just like the Jewish citizen, needs educational and religious autonomy. The conception that I am suggesting will allow much more room for national and cultural definition of groups and nationalities within one state. What we all need is not a distinction between religion and state, but the realization that all matters of culture and services are not the concern of the state, but an autonomous concern for each of the communities living here. If we allow the Arabs an autonomous culture with independent institutions of its own, and do not impose upon them the culture of the politician who happens to be in power, we shall remove the sting from the aspiration to separate inside Israel into two states.

- Are you not scared by the threat upon the dominance of a Jewish majority?

“This depends on how demography is interpreted. The foundation for our existence here is a renaissance of spiritual, humane and moral Judaism. A state that Jews of all denominations, not just extreme and ultra-religious Jews, will want to come to, knowing that they will be accepted here as wanted citizens. But if what is meant is that we need some more Jewish cannon fodder, and they need an Arabic majority as a tool for the extermination of the state of Is-

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rael, then it is not acceptable. It is in the interest of positive forces of both nations to build here a Jewish and multi-cultural state, that will be democratic and will allow equal opportunities.

There have always been those who despair

- Who are the leaders of this revolution?

“The Citizens. Each one where she is located will found the civil institutions that suit her, in her own way and with her natural partners. There is nobody dictating what is to be

done. What is grotesque, is that intellectuals from the left are objecting to the idea claiming it is too intellectual, while Bedouins, Arabs, Russian immigrants, Orientals and religious people lend me a listening ear. We speak the language of the heart, a language that people of other cultures understand quicker than the elitist intelligence whose clear interest in to not understand”

In a conference last March, dealing with “The Role of Civil Society at a Time of National Crisis”, organized by lawyer Offra Friedman, head of the Israeli section of the Jewish Agency and ICS together with some 25 different civil society organizations, was attended, along with globalization experts arriving from abroad, also by Yitzhak Ben-Aharon. The veteran revolutionary, who listened to the discussions and was weary of the theories, declared that unlike others he preferred to talk about the current political situation. Not from the paper, but from the blood of his heart. “I am weary of killing”, he roared in his typical rage. “I am sure that out of thousands of seeds like these there will arise a new civil movement that will sweep away the rule of generals and return Israel to its real goals and to sanity.”

- Is your revolution built upon a positive or negative lesson from the revolution of your parents?

“99 percent upon the positive. The straight line that joins us is the understanding that the world is the creation of the Human and is transformable. The difference in our ways derives merely from the difference in the epoch in which I am operating”.

- You could have been appointed a professor in the USA, why did you prefer to return to Israel over staying there?

“The land of Israel, the people of Israel and the state of Israel, this is me. To give this up, is to give myself up. The common interest is the essence of my life and my fate is the general fate. There have always been those who despair and those who celebrate on the board a sinking ship, alongside with those who already steer the new course towards a new horizon. It is like in the theory of evolution: The dinosaurs, who conduct themselves as rulers of the earth, do not have an inkling, that, while they devour the living Earth, inside the grass they are grazing on, there are little creatures, who do not count, but will in due time develop into mammals. We are small, but we are warm blooded.”

ICS, in partnership with GN3 and a coalition of global civil society networks, is organizing a major global conference in Israel in the spring of 2004: **Clash or Dialogue of Civilizations?**

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