

# Memories of Bnei Akiva c. 1944-1951.

The first time I had anything to do with Bnei Akiva was in 1944 in a small town in the north of England called Harrogate. Like many others I was an evacuee from London on account of the bombing of London in World War II.

Harrogate possessed a synagogue which served a small Jewish provincial community. I attended the Hebrew classes from which the Chavirim of the virtual BA group came. The founder of the group was a Miss Chana Winter, daughter of Rabbier Winter formerly of Teubek in Germany. He had established and managed a very kosher boarding house in Harrogate. Chana started a Shabbat afternoon group which really was a BA Chevra, but not called it. The format of the activities was that of a BA chevrah. Sometimes there were Sunday activities. Chana eventually settled (c. 1945) in kibbutz Lavie.

After the war ended (I and my family returned to London. In 1947, a BA group was founded in the communal building of the Clapton Synagogue in Lea Bridge Road. The Madrikh was Asher Kailingold and the Madrikah was Sheila Michaels.

However, the group did not last long and those of us who wished to continue with BA, joined the established Chevrah in Cazenove Road, Stamford Hill, N.16.

This chevrat was well attended & operated according to minhag BA, mostly on Shabbat. Everyone turned up, attired in Bigdei Shabbat: the boys wore suits (& ties) and the girls wore frocks in summer and jumpers and skirts in winter. No one ever turned up in short sleeves and sneakers. It was unheard of. Nobody ran around playing ball etc. There was always a rigid format; Madrichim - Asher Carlingold - Sheila Oster

Speakers would commence with a shema - song, <sup>well</sup> sung, and yes, the group was mixed. After a few shemin a sedra report was given by a chover who had been detailed to do so previously. When the review of the sedra was over, there was more song.

Next came a news report viz a review of the main events of the past week. More singing followed and then there was a Siyata. The topics presented were serious ones. BA had many expatriates etc who had come from Germany and they were very intellectual. I must point out, albeit somewhat belatedly, that BA was then very much a movement dedicated to kibbutz yick although with the emphasis on Chaiavit in agriculture. BA was really a junior part of Hapoel Ha Mizrahi. After the sedra, there were rikudim - yes, Miravim - Mixed dancing! At the end of which the Mifkac took place. In those

days the Shikat Ha-b'rovah was still the old one, Anachnu Binai Akivah, olim, olim arzah, be-haydil Torat-enu be-eret, moldeteinu, Yad Achik, etc. then replaced it.

I must stress that the relationship between boys and girls was absolutely correct. Usually, after the meetings the two sexes separated and went their own ways. There was never any case of improper conduct.

Before dealing with the question of camps, I would like to explain the set-up of the religious Zionist movement. The Mizrahi - Hapoel HaMizrahi movement had its office in Charing Cross Road, next Foyles the famous bookshop. In my time the BA was led by Arher Kaufman (from Scotland), Morde Davis and Jack Lehman. BA was orientated towards Hapoel HaMizrahi. When one left BA (too old for it) one could join its senior movement BACHA (Beith Chaluzim Dutiim) or Torah Ve'avodah (TVA) which was orientated towards Mizrahi, and was something of a Shidduch Club. Bachel had a Menorah Hachsharah on a farm located in Thaxted, Essex. There were BA groups in Leeds, Manchester & Dublin. In London the main groups were located in Stamford Hill and Willesden. There was a small group in the East End and I believe one existed in Brixton (with Junction). As far as I can

remember, there were no groups in Lytchams Green, Frickley & Hampstead Garden Suburb, let alone Edgware & St. Annes, then don't.

The groups so far mentioned were senior ones, I have no knowledge of what may have taken place with or in junior groups.

The first BA camp I attended was in 1948 in which year there were two: one in a former RAF airfield in Driffield, Yorks, and the other in Ormskirk in Lancashire (north of Liverpool) which was under canvas. I went to the Ormskirk camp. We were required to do some potato picking as part of our activities. The camp was under canvas, with Kelim (brand new) supplied by the War Agricultural Committee. It was a most enjoyable experience.

Camps lasted for two weeks at a time and I went to both of the camps.

We had some famous Madrasim:

Orach Schragai, son of Shlomo Zablman Schragai, Orach Yellin, sister of David Yellin leader of Lechi (Lochner (Herut Yisrael)

[The camp was visited by the police on her account] and Myrle Nestle who later became a High Court Judge.

Spent some agricultural work there were activities the details of which I cannot remember. Everyone took a turn on toranuk (clearing up etc) and boys rotated for Shemirah & staying up all night on watch. I do not remember having attended any

Shivrim to which reminds me that although the motto of BA was "Torah VaAvodah", there was then a greater emphasis on Avodah. Nowadays, it's the reverse. Very little Avodah, in fact I don't know whether present day Chaverim know what it means. The badge of BA was rimounted by a hammer; the present one has a sphyre; I feel sure that contemporary Chaverim or Chanimim as they are now called, know what a sphyre is. The only vehicle they know is a bi-cycle.

In 1949 we were joined by Yehudah Haffner <sup>ד"ר</sup> who had returned from Israel. He used to give us a shiur on Tanach with Redak commentary. That year, the summer camp (only <sup>site</sup>) was held on the Thasited farm; the Rosh Hamachanah was Jack Lehman. Once again the camp was under canvas, but I do not recollect doing any agricultural work. Two activities, however, do come to mind: a sports afternoon and a Le'yl Hityashvut. The latter activity was based on the Migdalei'or period when Chabitzim would go out at night and establish a yishuv on a chosen location. We used to re-enact this activity with the camp divided into two groups, each setting up a mock settlement. The activity entailed staying up all night because each group might attack each other. Once again I cannot recall any Shivrim being held but we survived.

In 1950 the summer camp took place

in Nottingham near Cambridge. Once again it was under canvas. The Rosh Ha'Minhaneh was Sheila Oster, known as Shoster. The camp had a slogan: "Ha'Medinah lo h'ee ha'sof ela ha-hat'challah!" Once again I cannot recall the activities that took place but I did enjoy the camp. We went into Cambridge to avail ourselves of the public baths. The camp was located in the vicinity of an RAF airfield from which Dakota planes were taking off & also to which they were landing. I believe they were still involved in the Berlin airlift.

This was the last camp I attended but I do remember staying at the Theated farm in the summer of 1951 for a week or so together with a few other Chaverim.

That was the effective end of my connection with BA; From January 1952 to January 1954, I was serving my two years National Service in the British Army. Post service I often attended Buchad or TVA groups on Shabbat.

In retrospect, I owe a lot to BA; the meetings, camps, friendships etc. Chevrotint was stressed. We referred to each other as Chaver, Chaverim; nowadays, they call them Chavolim etc. The movement seems to have become more religious; more Torah than Avodah. We were much more down to earth. We travelled to camp by public transport; we slept under canvas and often did some agricultural work.

From the little I see of the local B.A., the youngsters seem to be pampered: luxury coaches to & from camps, indoor accommodation and many other luxuries. However, there is infinitely more learning and fun than.

Addendum:

In addition to the farm in Thaxted there were also the following:  
 hotels for charwomen wishing to work in agriculture, located in Buntingham and Dorkenfield, Surrey, there was a Meeting Ground in Manchester.

Gerald Lever  
 Melbourne, Australia

Menachem Av. ~~5779~~ 5779

August 2019

Permission is herewith given to anyone wishing to publish this account to edit at will, to reject or accept as seen fit.

G. Lever

G. Lever

Formerly of London UK, now residing in Melbourne since January 1974

