

## **History**

**By: Bnei Akiva of Cleveland**

Bnei Akiva first came into existence in the late 1920's, following World War I. At that time, the League of Nations granted Britain the mandate over Eretz Yisra'el (then Palestine). The Jewish pioneers in Eretz Yisra'el were struggling, engaged in a Herculean effort to succeed economically and to build their homeland. However, there was another concern as well: the need to redefine the spiritual-cultural identity of the Jewish nation.

These were the years of the Third Aliyah (immigration) to Eretz Yisra'el (1919-1923). This Aliyah was clearly characterized by two elements: economic hardship and the evolution of a strong ideological socialist group. The general direction was to create a new Jewish society, to see the development of a "new Jew". To do so, these immigrants felt they must abandon the "old" and "binding" Jewish tradition, together with its culture and laws.

### **Religious laborers take action**

While the secular laborers were gaining power, the "Hapo'el Hamizrachi" workers movement, part of the Mizrachi movement (established in 1901), was founded. Its goal was to organize and unify the few religious laborers who were, at that time, economically deprived and spiritually rejected, and to transform them into a force to be reckoned with. The movement's first leaders consolidated a new philosophical perspective, intended as a counterweight to the secular-socialist ideology of other workers' groups. As self-perceived, Hapo'el Hamizrachi was the active realization of the Religious-Zionist ideals of the Mizrachi movement: "The Land of Israel, for the People of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel". It dedicated itself to engaging in all aspect of life in Israel, religious and secular, including labor and settlement of the land.

### **Difficulties**

The Hapo'el Hamizrachi movement encountered many difficulties. The Histadrut Klalit (national labor organization) and many Workers' Committees incited against Hopo'el

Hamizrachi members and prevented their employment. The Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet Leyisra'el), which was responsible for allocation of land, gave land to all of the other settlement associations, but not to Hapo'el Hamizrachi. There was also another sort of problem: on the one hand, Hapo'el Hamizrachi met with hostility from non-Zionist religious Jews, and on the other, secular society "rewarded" the movement with patronizing haughtiness and contempt for its devotion to religion. Although the ones who suffered most from this attitude were the workers who belonged to Hapo'el Hamizrachi, it also had a decisive influence on a very important group, the focus of this article: youth.

### **The younger generation abandons its parents' values**

In the wake of the ostracism and economic difficulties encountered by Hapo'el Hamizrachi members, many of their adolescent children chose to join secular social groups. They were drawn to socialist/workers' youth movements (such as Hano'ar Ha'oved, Machanot Ha'olim) and citizens'/right-wing counterparts (e.g., Hatzofim, Maccabee, Betar). This situation, essentially a social and psychological ebbside of religious youth, could not be tolerated for any length of time, and presented a severe existential threat to the new religious movement. In the winter of 1929 (5689), Yechiel Eliash, then an officer of the Brit Olamit shel Torah Va'avoda ("National Alliance of Torah and Labor"), suggested to Hapo'el Hamizrachi the establishment of a religious youth movement, with the purpose of strengthening young people's spirit and organizing them within a proud social framework.

This proposal was met with lack of enthusiasm and even opposition. The reasons for its rejection were:

1. 1. By their very nature, youth movements are rebellious, and therefore have no place in religious society.
2. 2. This type of youth movement might interfere with studies.

Yechiel Eliash did not bow to the views of his opponents. Years later, he explained:

*ruled mightily. Any Hapo'el At that time, there was a need to rebel. The Histadrut...” was banished in disgrace. Anti- Hamizrachi member who sought work in construction a youth movement would have to religious sentiment was rife... We believed that power to erect a religious Judaism with engender faith in its own strength and in our religious Judaism... creative Jews, but organized [individual] great accomplishments. Not feared rebellion and [of Hapo'el Hamizrachi] The opponents, including leaders must be contended that a religious movement, intrinsically, cannot be oppositional and impaired; others traditional. Some worried that the conduct of study in school would be youth movement. Impressive disparaged young people's ability to stand at the head of a However, despite all this opposition, I .educators, they argued, must hold this position “...movement decided to found the youth*

Concurrent with the establishment of the movement in Israel, organizations of religious youth operated in the Diaspora. Some of them adopted the name Bnei Akiva and others had appellations such as Hashomer Hadati. Twenty-five years later (1958/5739), the Israeli and Diaspora groups merged and the *Mazkirut Olamit* (World Secretariat) of Bnei Akiva was formed.