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ALLE RECHTE VORBEHALTEN:  
VERVIELFÄLTIGUNG UND VERBREITUNG NUR NACH  
VORHERIGER GENEHMIGUNG DURCH DAS ERNST-BLOCH-  
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*Nostalgia*  
**Avishai Margalit**  
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### **Reunion**

Half a century ago I was released from the army. I needed a part time job to carry me through University. I found one: a social instructor in a youth village in Jerusalem. The idea was that I would look after a group of young children, mainly in the evening, and the rest of the time I shall be free to study – the Youth Village provided me with a room with a view, pitiful lunches and meager salary. In no time, I discovered that I got more than I bargained for. I became responsible for about thirty children for whom I was, the sole address in the world. It was a total institution and a total institution calls for total commitment. My life in the coming years vacillated between the Youth Village and the university, each demanding in its own way, the Village in an emotionally total way. The children were new immigrants from practically everywhere; many however, came from North Africa, others from Europe. Some were born after the war in desolate Displaced Persons camps; some were left in orphanages with nothing but a name tag. As I discovered later, parents of the DP camps kids were survivors with amazing life stories, but then only those with amazing life stories survived.

My friend, the renowned journalist, Danny Rubinstein, who worked with me in the village, made an acute observation; children with no one in the world, were at the top of the Village pecking order. They were considered the toughest of the tough the coolest of the cool, much like nomadic rugged individuals of Westerns, coming from nowhere and with no place to go.

A few weeks ago there was a reunion in the Youth Village, celebrating 60 years of its foundation. Many, but not all showed up, some made their way from abroad. I went to the reunion with a mixture of thrill and trepidation. I wasn't sure that my memory would serve me well, hence the trepidation. All the years since I was there – I spent six years in the Youth Village. - I chastened myself for not conducting a diary. In my arrogance, I thought that my story as an educator is as good as that of Makarenko. I counted on my good memory to do the trick one day and help me write my experience in the Village, only to discover that my memories from this period were fading away. I wonder what the evaporation of my memory tells me, if at all, about the importance of that experience in my life.

I do retain strong memories from earlier times, the times of my childhood. I had recently a rare chance to calibrate my early childhood memories with Amos Oz's, justly celebrated haunting memories, as told in his: *Story of Love and Darkness*. We were raised in same neighborhood and we went together to same kindergarten. It kept bothering me why those memories are so much more vivid in my mind than the memories I have from my time in the Youth Village? Is the vividness of one's memory an indication of the importance what is remembered, or, is it just a fluke?

The reunion in the Youth Village was nothing like an ordinary school reunion; it was as if I said a total institution and a total institution produces a totally absorbing meeting. Those I met tried hard to give an honest account of their life since they left the Village, Their accounts were unsentimental, free from self-pity, mentioning moments of pride and moments of failure, moments of joy and moments of despair. It occurred to me that those who came to the reunion were not a representative sample of the children who were educated in the Youth Village. I suspect that those who did relatively well in life were over-represented. But when it came to memories of their time in the Village, I was struck how nostalgic and idealizing their memories were. Their memories were far more detailed and vivid than mine: partly because they rehearsed them so much more. But detailed as their memories were, they were highly idealized, not just stylized, but idealized.

This truly puzzled me.

## **Returning home**

Nostalgia is a compound of two Greek terms; *nostos* (returning home) and *algos* (pain or yearning). It sounds Homeric, but it is not. It was coined by a Swiss doctor at the end of the 17th century. It meant to replace the term for homesickness, mainly with reference to Swiss mercenary soldiers (*Schweizerheimweh*). It was coined as a medical term, with the idea of taking "sickness" in the compound home-sickness, literally. The syndrome is akin to depression, the etiology; idealized memories of home create intense yearning to go home.

The term nostalgia is new, but, the idea of yearning to return home is half as old as time. The pain of returning home is indeed a Homeric theme. It became a major theme of modern literature, with the stress on the idea that such returning is bound to fail; for in the mean time, the wanderer has been changed and the home has been changed. A

glaring example of such failure is the Hebrew Noble laureate S.Y. Agnon story with the telling name Farenheim.

The Village was home for children, who are by now aging adults. For some it was the first home, for others, the only home they had in life. How utterly different the children of the Village remember the Village, from the way many kibbutz children construct their childhood in the kibbutz. For the kibbutz children, the children house, where they grew up is the opposite of home, depicted by some as orphanage. This is truly remarkable, given that kibbutz children led infinitely more privileged life, then the children in the Youth Village.

I believe that nostalgia is a good meeting point between your concern with memory, a concern with the effect of pathologies of memory on dysfunctional behavior, and my concern with the ethics of memory. On the face of it nostalgia looks like innocuous and basically a harmless faint emotion and on many cases it is. But nostalgia may form distorted memory, with some serious ethical implications.

### **Distorting nostalgia**

Nostalgia is not a disease, unless it turns into clinical depression. But nostalgia, like its kin emotion, sentimentality may turn into moral sentiment. A moral sentiment is an emotion which affects the fabric of moral life. Revenge and resentment are paradigmatic cases of moral sentiments. By sentiment, I mean an emotion that hinges in an essential way on language.

Nostalgia, like its cousin sentimentality, tends to distort reality in a particular way. The difference between sentimentality and nostalgia is that nostalgia distorts the reality of time past. Nostalgia idealizes its object – say, the Village – and locates it in time of great purity and innocence, thus the object, says the Village, is enshrined with purity and innocence. Nostalgia, in its primary sense, is internally related to first hand memory. But then, nostalgia, especially collective nostalgia, may turn into vicarious memory by plugging one's memory to first hand memories of others. Indeed, the two sides to the conflict in our contested debatable land Israel/Palestine are saturated with vicarious nostalgia.

The Palestinians nostalgia for their pre-1948 life is a form of vicarious nostalgia as the number of those who have first hand memories of life in Palestine before 1948 has dwindled into insignificant. But nostalgia may take even more indirect forms. The nostalgia of the Jews, to the land of Israel is such an indirect case, being plugged less to first hand memories of living people and more to the Bible and liturgical prayers. Prayers played an important role in forming Jewish nostalgia. When Jews in exile prayed for rain, they did not mean rain in Spain, but rather rain in the holy land.

Literature fed Zionist nostalgia. I once asked my father what made you come to the Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel)? Mapu's book "The Love of Zion" was my father's answer. It is a 19 century biblical style fictional novel. My father's answer was not unusual for his Mayflower generation.

Both communities use the language of *nosts*, the language of return, returning home. Even if, the use of return is by now mostly metaphorical, it still retains tremendous evocative power in both communities. Vicarious nostalgia is as strong as primary nostalgia.

Let me haste with a disclaimer. I want my critic of nostalgia to be an exercise in the moral psychology. But I am aware that such criticism may be taken as a sign of emotional snobbism. That is an expression of derision directed towards simple emotions of common people.

The danger is there, but emotional snobbism is not what I am after, or so I hope.

Nostalgia, I maintain may distort reality in a morally disturbing way. True, there are mild forms of distortion by nostalgia, in the sense in which, distortion in retouching a photograph by removing the sitter's wrinkles is a mild form of distortion. It is a harmless way of making one look a bit younger. However, there are serious distortions of nostalgia; not removing wrinkles, but removing the shit from a past world. Think of the so called Ostalgia in contemporary Germany. It is nostalgia for the life in former East Germany, life perceived as simple and innocent in comparison to life under the menace of commercial capitalism. In Ostalgia the shit of the Stazi and the bullshit of the party comrades, Der Genossen, is removed and all that is left is a sense of the purity of an intimate community, of true Gemeinschaft.

### **Nostalgia as kitsch**

There was a great deal of shit and bullshit in the Youth Village, but it was all removed by the alchemy of the former children's memory. They transformed the Village into a world of innocence and purity. My memory was not as good as theirs, but in my memory there was still room for shit-memories and enough traces of the old bullshit.

Nostalgia, like sentimentality, is the fuel of kitsch. I learned the concept of kitsch in the Village. My room in the Village was neighboring a flat of a formidable Central European dame. She was the Village mother superior.

Once, I received a gift, a popular album of photographs called The Family of Man. I didn't care much for the album, but I cared about the one who gave it to me. I showed it to my no-nonsense neighbor. She leafed through the pictures of the smiling humanity, along with very sweet pictures of humanity shedding pearl tears in time of sorrow, and came with a brisk verdict: this is kitsch; real humans are not like that.

She herself was a survivor, with a tattooed number on her hand, sentimental kitsch was not for her.

The concept of kitsch remained with me since, not so much as a term for aesthetic appreciation (incidentally, Edward Steichen of the Family of Man, was a very able photographer), or rather the lack of it, but as a manifestation of moral failure. Nostalgic kitsch can easily be put in service of brutality. Jung was right in viewing sentimentality as the superstructure of brutality. When an innocent place of the past, say the German pastoral Heimat, is perceived as threaten, those who are threatening such purity can be nothing but demonic forces of impurity. In countering such demonic forces everything goes, namely every brutal thing.

I believe that both sides to the conflict in our promise/ punished land here make nostalgia and brutality work extra-hours. I don't claim that brutality necessarily needs nostalgia, but it helps.

There are of course other forms of pernicious nostalgia in our promised/punished land. On the one hand, some people of my generation and upbringing, nourish Ashkenazi nostalgia to the pristine society of the Yishuv (the pre-state Hebrew community in Palestine) and to the early days of Israel, before the invasion of immigrants from Islamic

countries. On the other hand, there is the counter –nostalgia of some immigrants from Islamic countries, saying; we lived happily in our innocent and pure communities in Marrakesh, and Bagdad, based on respect for parents and elders, till you soulless Ashkenazi transposed us to your state and ruined, beyond repair, our innocence and beautiful form of life.

What was so refreshingly new to me in the nostalgia of the Youth Village veterans is the fact that it was free from victims' nostalgia. Theirs was pure longing to the home they believed they had found in the Village. Encountering their nostalgia made me think that we should treat nostalgia the way we treat cholesterol, by distinguishing between good nostalgia and bad nostalgia.

I use nostalgia, as a memory bound sentiment, for a meeting point between your concerns and mine. If your concern is the therapeutic role of memory, my concern is the ethics of memory. Nostalgia is for me a case for the ethics of memory. But then I should say a bit more what my concern with the ethics of memory amounts to.

Ernst Bloch was interested in Utopia not in Nostalgia. Utopia like Nostalgia is concocted out of Greek roots but with a modern twist. It famously means etymologically speaking, “a non-place”. But by the way it is pronounced in English it also means a good place (e-utopia). The double meaning captures well what utopia is about.

Ernst Bloch's mission of Utopianism was aimed at creating a good place. On the face of it seems that there is sharp contrast between nostalgia and utopia. Nostalgia is backward-looking. Utopia is forward-looking. Bloch, if anything, is a prophet of the future, and in no way a gloomy lamenter of the past. But then, Nostalgia as Svetlana Boym aptly labeled comes into flavors: reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia. The reflective nostalgia is a mood of brooding with melancholy on past gone it is about longing sadly, but without the hope of bringing the past back: we cannot step twice to the same river of time, we and time past changed irretrievably, hence the sweet sadness. The reflective mood is passive. Restorative nostalgia is about restoring the past, the reference is to the past but it is a forward looking utopian attitude. There is a great deal in common between restorative nostalgia and utopia.

Nostalgia and utopia are facing the same danger; the danger of moral kitsch. One needs tremendous strength to engage in nostalgia of utopian restorative kind, and avoid moral kitsch. It is hard but not impossible.

I believe that Ernst Bloch is glaring example of one who mounted a mighty struggle of retaining Utopian thinking while fighting in others and especially in himself against the tendency to indulge in moral Kitsch.