

Article by Peggy Wolff

As Alfie Nathan, 65, wakes up one morning in the sun-drenched bedroom of his Glenview home, his mind races through a list of things he has been planning to do, from rereading an article about Israel's Law of Return to gathering some old *kibbutz* photos to finding an interesting news story about a Jewish person. With another Passover drawing nigh, what's uppermost in his mind these days is the personal *Haggadah* he wants to compose for this year's *Seder*.

The *Haggadah* is a collection of narratives, prayers and blessings recalling the Exodus of the ancient Jews from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. It is read at various times during the *Seder*, the ceremonial family meal traditionally held on the first and second evenings of Passover to commemorate the Exodus. Taking the view that the *Haggadah* should also reflect recent events in Jewish history as well as his own personal experiences, Nathan, as he has been doing for the last 10 years, will take the traditional *Haggadah* text and enrich it with such passages as those that deal with springtime, the cycle of agriculture, Nazi persecution, the modern Jewish exodus to an independent state. Snatching time here and there from his busy schedule, Nathan usually takes about two weeks to complete his task.

Slightly lonesome for Israel, he reflects on the time when he was a *chalutz*, or a *kibbutz* pioneer, for 27 years. Nathan, of modest height, salt-and-pepper hair and a deep-red complexion, brushes off any suggestion of extraordinary toughness.

Seated now in his comfortable living room, Nathan explains to a visitor: "Outsiders thought we were hardy, but we were just a group of youngsters who wanted to go to Israel and build up the country. And the country gave us that *kibbutz* to build up."

Each *kibbutz*, or collective settlement, was conceived not merely as a place to work and live but also as a part of a young nation's defense against hostile neighbors. The *kibbutzim* established the Jewish presence up to Israel's borders and provided leadership and manpower for the army while raising food for a steadily increasing population. Members were expected to work according to their ability. In return, all their basic needs were met. No wages were paid, putting shoemakers, psychologists and engineers on the same footing, with equal access to food, shelter, clothing and medical care.

"I used to walk around the *kibbutz* on a Sabbath, look at the trees, the cows, the sheep, the lambs, the chickens and get a lot of enjoyment that we did it all ourselves," Nathan says, adding that *kibbutz* life is a theme he likes to include in all his *Haggadah* dot.

Nathan doesn't now look much like the *kibbutz*nik who for years lived in a tent and put on clammy boots at night to slop through mud to go to the toilet. The flop-

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Photo by Peggy Wolff

NATHAN'S PASSOVER

What the Exodus means to a modern Jew

py hat and the baggy khaki trousers are gone, but the work ethic is still with him. That is probably why he was able to start and make a success of his import business just a few years after his arrival in America 13 years ago.

His house, in a heavily wooded section of Glenview, is Colonial in style, not fancy but plush with such fine details as ceiling-to-floor glass doors leading to a wooden deck with a view of tall oak and elm trees in the back. On the driveway are a 1986 Buick sedan with a cellular phone and a Chrysler LeBaron convertible.

As his wife, Lil, warms homemade cookies in the microwave in the kitchen, Nathan continues: "I was the black sheep of my family," he says, "because I didn't want to go to college and had no feel for business. I wanted to repair tractors and combines. Imagine, a Jewish person wanting to be a mechanic."

Nathan was born in London in 1923, one of the seven children of Russian immigrants—Anna Guravitch, who had come from a well-to-do family in St. Petersburg, and Nathan Hershovitz, the son of a miller in a nearby town. Both parents imbued their children with strong Zionist ideals.

In 1939, when he was 16 and already

active in the Zionist Youth movement, Nathan joined *Hechalutz* (the Pioneers), an organization that prepared young men and women to live in Palestine by teaching them how to farm. Two men greatly influenced Nathan at this time—Teddy Kollect, now the mayor of Jerusalem, who was a guide on the farm outside London where Nathan trained, and A.D. Gordon, a leader of the Palestinian labor movement.

But more than labor ideology, it was the horror he witnessed in the Nazi concentration camps that evoked his most passionate attachment to Zionism. "When I went in with the British army to free Bergen-Belsen, it was the atmosphere that got to me... the filth they were living in... the ovens still burning."

His strongest feelings were aroused, he says, when he worked beside a doctor who was forced to turn away many dying camp victims, choosing instead to give his limited supply of medicine to those he could still save. Calmly he recalls those days when he kept his tears in by day but cried by himself at night.

The experience committed Nathan with increased passion to the idea that the Jewish people needed a home of their own. "They cannot go through generation after generation being persecuted. They must have a place where they have a say for themselves," he says. This theme of Nazi persecution echoing the ancient slavery of the Jews in Egypt is one that he often includes in his *Haggadahs*.

In 1947, the year before the birth of Israel as a Jewish state, Nathan, then 24, sailed to Palestine under a false identity as a Canadian tourist to get around the severe restrictions on Jewish immigration being imposed by the British. His first year was spent training at an established *kibbutz*, Kfar Blum, where he joined a group of 40 other English immigrants, "professors and businessmen full of degrees who were being made into laborers."

After learning how to milk cows, tend sheep, drive trucks, raise carp and care for apple orchards, the group moved to the town of Hadera, where they worked as day laborers for local Jewish farmers. Groups of 5 or 10 also worked elsewhere—in Dead Sea salt mines, another *kibbutz's* plywood or fruit-juice factory. The wages weren't much, Nathan recalls, but they helped fi-

Alfy Nathan with three of his grandchildren at a Seder table in his Glenview home, reading from a Haggadah he has composed himself.

When Israel was declared a state on May 14, 1948, Nathan and some of his fellow workers were at the Kiryat Anavim kibbutz. That night the Arabs pulled up everything the kibbutzniks had planted there—400 plum and apple trees. Called back to Hadera, Nathan's group had to improvise to get through an Arab blockade. "We took a truck and made a cabin out of two sheets of steel and filled it up with stones to make it bulletproof. We lay on the floor so the bullets wouldn't hit us. That was our armored truck," he says.

"Two months after the state was declared, Ben-Gurion called us to his office in Jerusalem and said: 'There's this area in Galilee between the Mishmar Hayarden and Tiberias [on the Syrian border] where there are no Jewish settlements. I'd like for you to settle that border. Do you agree?'"

Nathan and his British group agreed, and thus, on July 2, 1948, Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi was born. "We didn't want the Arabs to see us settling, so we had to do it very quietly. Each kibbutz in the area sent five or six people to help. We met at Kibbutz Machanayim, where we loaded trucks with tents, food, barbed wire, tools and set out at midnight. By daylight we had cleared some boulders, the barbed-wire fence was up, the tents were up, somebody was cooking some food and from then on we lived there."

"If those Arabs had known how poorly we were armed, they could have taken us in a minute. Israel had no arms to give us, so one person used to run around at night firing one revolver from different points so the Arabs would think we were well armed."

Sustained by meals consisting only of two pieces of bread a day, cabbage and potatoes, the group planted a small vegetable garden, grape vines and apple trees, built a hut for 50 chickens and a shed for 10 cows.

Nathan's kibbutz befriended the Arabs who lived a mile away in the village of Tuba el Chet by laying out a 1-inch water line for them. "Up until then they had to go to a spring 5 miles away on their donkeys." But even that gesture was not without its problem. The local Arab chief took control of the water line and began charging a fee for every can of water the villagers took from it. The solution: "We left the tap for the chief and brought in another water line for the rest of the village," thereby preserving the good relations for many years afterward, with the Arabs inviting Nathan and other kibbutzniks for coffee and bread, and kibbutz nurses helping the Arabs with their medical needs.

In 1949 Nathan married Louie Rees, an Englishwoman who was part of the group that first trained with Nathan. "I went to work in the morning," Nathan remembers his wedding day, "came home and washed, put on a pair of trousers and a shirt, and we went to the rabbi, who was 7 miles away in the town of Rosh Pinah." Twelve

kibbutzniks witnessed the union under a *huppah* [canopy] of felt cloth while chickens ran around the yard. When the couple returned home, they moved into a double tent.

Nathan's kibbutz next decided to build a foundry to make irrigation equipment, utilizing the talents of a metallurgist from Oxford and a youngster from Glasgow whose father was in the metal-fabrication business. For raw material the kibbutzniks scoured the Israeli army dump outside of Tel Aviv, which was full of the remains of French, German and British aircraft that had crashed in the Middle East. Trailer loads of airplane parts—wings, engines, fuselages—were carted back to the kibbutz, where the scrap metal was melted down in a primitive furnace built out in the open. The recycled metal was then shaped and machined into the end product—fittings to join irrigation pipes—which were then sold to all the kibbutzim that were previously buying them from abroad. According to Nathan, the enterprise saved Israel hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Prompted by the competition from other kibbutzim that began building and operating similar foundries over the next 10 years, Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi decided to pour a more sophisticated metal, stainless steel. Under a license agreement with an English company, Nathan's group learned the procedures and the techniques for using steel scrap to make pipe fittings. Nathan's role in the enterprise took him quickly from plant construction and expansion to production to sales.

"Israel wasn't big enough to take all our output, so we started exporting, and I started traveling all over the world—from Canada to Venezuela, from Finland to Greece and Italy."

"It wasn't easy [at first] to return after spending \$10,000 on a sales trip and face the board of directors without one order," says Nathan, but after his third trip, the orders started rolling in. With the help of Pinchas Saphir, Israel's minister of trade, Nathan was able to slice into the European market by bypassing agents and setting up a kibbutz industries office in England that sold products on behalf of all the kibbutzim. After three years in England, he returned to the kibbutz as head of exports.

By then the kibbutz had outgrown Nathan's original vision of it. The mud paths had become paved roads; the stony soil was rich with corn; communication was by telephone, not semaphore; and the board of directors, which included everyone, now numbered 400.

Oddly enough, it was when export orders increased that Nathan first began to think of leaving the kibbutz. To keep up with the orders, two busloads of new immigrants started coming in daily to help in the foundry, a move that Nathan strongly favored but which the general assembly, socialist to the core, opposed. Arguments ensued, which became more intense as the orders increased.

Another conflict arose when Nathan suggested setting up a factory outlet in Tel Aviv where the kibbutz could sell its foundry products itself. "Why should the distributor in town make 30 percent? We could keep the profit," he argued. But after a protracted debate, Nathan's idea was

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turned down.

So after 27 prodigiously successful years building Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi, Nathan asked for time off and left, with no money and no belongings. He was 53. He had good health, an entrepreneur's mind and two grown daughters from a marriage that by then had failed largely because of all the traveling he had had to do.

Coming to the U.S., Nathan first stayed with his sister in Skokie, finding work the day after he arrived. He was torn about leaving his children, but after several trips back to Israel, he decided to settle here. He was impressed, he now says, by America's opportunities but also concerned that he was now without the communal support of the kibbutz. Now he would have to take care of himself, pay for his own medical needs, do the shopping and the cooking and the laundry.

"After six weeks I'd saved up enough to

move to the singles area . . . the 'with it' section on Sheridan Road near Hollywood Avenue," he says. As he packed his car, his sister spoke to him, and he relishes the memory of that conversation.

"The *rabbitzen* [rabbi's wife] would like to introduce you to an elegant lady in the community," she said.

"What's wrong with that?" he replied.

"I think Lil's too elegant for you."

"Then, all right, let's meet her."

On their first date, as Lil now tells it, Nathan was smarting from the embarrassment of having to pick her up in a white Cadillac, so he called ahead of time to make sure she understood it was his boss' car, not his. Then he took her to an apartment sale so he could look for used furniture.

Nathan and Lil married in March of 1978, less than a year after he started his own business, in October, 1977. His company, Sharon Piping, imports stainless-steel pipes, valves and fittings and sells them to plumbing wholesalers and distributors.

Lil was instrumental in Nathan's adjustment here, his sister says. He needed someone like her to fill his life, and she brought

him into her personal circle, dressed him for business, stayed up nights doing his books and got him used to the good things in life. Lil in turn makes the point that after meeting Nathan, everything fell into place for her, too.

Nathan won't discuss his company's finances, but they are good enough to enable him to own a 25,000-square-foot warehouse on an acre and a half of land in Northlake, take his two daughters and Lil's three children from a previous marriage and the children's spouses on a cruise to celebrate his 10th wedding anniversary, send his American grandchildren on trips to Israel and his Israeli grandchildren on trips to the U.S. as bar mitzvah presents, help bring groups of disabled Israeli soldiers to Chicago for two weeks each summer and donate money to needy people in Israel.

Shortly before Nathan left Israel, two generations of kibbutzniks sat down to a

Seder using a Haggadah they had written themselves. Because that Haggadah, in addition to the traditional Exodus passages, included references to the new Israel they were helping to build, the Seder that they shared had special meaning to everyone present, including the children. "[It was] the realization of what the Seder's all about," Nathan says. "Israel wouldn't be there today without the kibbutzim. That made the difference. No question about it."

Three days before Passover, Nathan and his wife will set the Seder table, carefully placing the plates, candlesticks and cups that will be used in the ritual meal. They will also show off their collection of Haggadah, most of them in bound volumes and some dating to the 16th Century. By then Nathan will have typed up his latest Haggadah on standard letter-size pages, made Xerox copies and bound them into booklets—one for each of the 35 guests he's inviting this year. With it, his family Seder once again will span the centuries, celebrating not only the ancient Exodus from Egypt but also the modern rejuvenation of Israel into which he has poured so much of his heart and soul. ■