

WEEKEND

Adam Raz

The discussions were fraught with emotion. Cabinet minister Haim-Moshe Shapira said that all of Israel's moral foundations had been undermined. Minister David Remez remarked that the deeds that had been done remove us from the category of Jews and from the category of human beings altogether. Other ministers were also appalled: Mordechai Bentov wondered what kind of Jews would left in the country after the war; Aharon Zisling related that he had had a sleepless night – the criminals, he said, were striking at the soul of the whole government. Some ministers demanded that the testimonies be investigated and that those responsible be held to account. David Ben-Gurion was evasive. In the end, the ministers decided on an investigation. The result was the establishment of the “committee to examine cases of murder in [by] the army.”

It was November 1948. Testimonies of massacres perpetrated by Israel Defense Forces soldiers against Arabs – targeting unarmed men as well as elderly folk and women and children – were piling up on the cabinet table. For years these discussions were concealed from the public by the military censors. Now, an investigative report by Haaretz and the Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research for the first time makes public the sharp exchanges between the ministers on this subject and reveals testimonies about three previously unknown massacres, as well as new details about the killing in Hula, Lebanon, one of the most flagrant crimes of the war.

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In October 1948, the IDF launched two large-scale operations: In the south, Operation Yoav, which opened a road to the Negev; and in the north, Operation Hiram. In the latter, within 30 hours, dozens of Arab villages in the north were overrun and tens of thousands of residents fled or were expelled from their homes. Within less than three days, the IDF had conquered the Galilee and also extended its reach into villages in southern Lebanon. The overwhelming majority of them took no part in the fighting. Most of the exchanges of fire were between the IDF and the Arab Salvation Army, consisting of volunteers from Arab countries.

At the time of Israel's campaign to conquer the Galilee, 120,000 Arabs remained in the area, half the number who had resided there on the eve of the United Nations' adoption of the partition plan, in November 1947. The IDF's rapid advance toward the northern border brought the soldiers into contact with the population that remained in the villages, among whom were elderly folk and women and children. The Palestinians' fate was now in the hands of the Israeli forces. That was the background to the massacres that were perpetrated against civilians and against Arab soldiers who were taken captive. At the war's end, some 30,000 Arabs remained in the north.

The atrocities of the 1948 war are known from diverse historical documentation: soldiers' letters, unpublished memoirs written in real time, minutes of meetings held by political

At Meron, it was reported, ‘They took as captives peaceful residents, among them women and children, ordered them to dig a pit, pushed them into it... and shot the unfortunates until they were all murdered. There was even a woman with an infant in her arms.’

parties, and from other sources. Reports about military and governmental investigations are for the most part classified, and the heavy hand of military censorship continues to obstruct academic research and investigative reporting. Still, the open sources provide a picture that is slowly becoming clearer. For example, testimonies about previously unknown massacres that took place in Reineh, at Meron and in Al-Burj, which are discussed below.

Reineh killings

The village of Reineh, near Nazareth, was conquered even before Operation Hiram, in July 1948. A few months later, Aharon Haim Cohen, from the department of the Histadrut labor federation that dealt with the Arab population, demanded that a representative of the parallel section in Mapam, a left-wing party that was part of the government, clarify the following: “Why were 14 Arabs murdered in the village of Reineh at the beginning of September, among them a Bedouin woman and also a member of the Land of Israel Workers Alliance, Yusuf al-Turki? They were seized next to the village, accused of smuggling, taken to the village and murdered.” Sheikh Taher al-Taveri, one of the leaders of the Palestinian community in the

‘Murder by the army’

Though thousands of files remain classified, an effort by Haaretz and the Akevot Institute has led to access to minutes from early cabinet meetings revealing that government ministers were often informed in real time about massacres carried out by Israeli soldiers during the 1948 war



A 1949 cabinet meeting. Ben-Gurion chided his ministers: “It’s easy to sit here around this table and cast blame on a small number of people, on those who fought.”

Hugo Mendelsohn / GPO

north, maintained that the Reineh massacre “is not the only one” and that these acts were “being carried out for the purpose of robbery.” The victim's families claimed that those murdered had been carrying hundreds of liras, a very substantial amount.

The village of Al-Burj (today Modi'in) was also conquered in July 1948, in Operation Dani. According to a document, whose author is unknown, that was found in the Yad Yaari Archive, four elderly men remained in the village after its capture: “Hajj Ibrahim, who helped out in the military kitchen, a sick elderly woman and another elderly man and [elderly] woman.” Eight days after the village was conquered, the soldiers sent Ibrahim off to pick vegetables in order to distance him from what was about to occur. “The three others were taken to an isolated house. Afterward an antitank shell (‘Fiat’) was fired. When the shell missed the target, six hand grenades were thrown into the house. They killed an elderly man and woman, and the elderly woman was put to death with a firearm. Afterward they torched the house and burned the three bodies. When Hajj Ibrahim returned with his guard, he was told that the three others had been sent to the hospital in Ramallah. Apparently he didn't believe the story, and a few hours later he too was put to death, with four bullets.”

According to the testimony of Shmuel Mikunis, a member of the Provisional State Council (predecessor to the Knesset) from the Communist Party, and reported here for the first time, atrocities were also perpetrated in the Meron region. Mikunis got around the censors in real time by asking the prime minister a parliamentary question, which ended up in the Knesset Archive. He demanded clarification from David Ben-Gurion about acts that Mikunis said had been done by members of the underground Irgun militia: “A. They annihilated with a machine gun 35 Arabs who had surrendered to that company with a white flag in their hands. B. They took as captives peaceful residents, among them women and children, ordered them to dig a pit, pushed them into it with long French bayonets and shot the unfortunates until they were all murdered. There was even a woman with an infant in her arms. C. Arab children of about 13-14 who were playing with grenades were all shot. D. A girl of about 19-20 was raped by men from Altalena [an Irgun unit]; afterward she was stabbed with a bayonet and a wooden stick was thrust into her body.”

This is the place to emphasize that we have no additional testimony that reinforces the brutal descriptions of the events in Reineh, Al-Burj and Meron. This is not surprising, considering how much material remains locked away in

the archives. With regard to Mikunis' testimony, there are additional reasons to suspend healthy skepticism. In that same parliamentary question to Ben-Gurion, Mikunis provided a minutely detailed description of the massacre in the Lebanese village of Hula, and it turned out later, in court, that his sources were reliable. (There is no evidence of a response from the prime minister.)

‘Some still showed signs of life’

The ministers appear to have been especially perturbed by the Hula massacre. The village was conquered by a company of the Carmeli Brigade, 22nd battalion, under the command of Shmuel Lahis. Hundreds of residents, a majority of Hula's population, fled, but about 60 people remained in the village and surrendered without resistance. After the conquest, two massacres were perpetrated there, in two successive days. On the first day, October 31, 1948, 18 villagers were murdered, and on the following day the number of victims stood at 15.

Lahis, the company commander, was the only combatant who was tried on murder charges in Operation Hiram. He was acquitted by reason of doubt in the first episode, but was convicted of

the second day's massacre, which he carried out himself. The Lahis verdict was later relegated to the law archive of Tel Aviv University, and a short excerpt from the ruling on his appeal is here published for the first time.

Lahis ordered the removal “of those 15 Arabs from the house they were in and led them to an isolated house which was some distance from the village's Muslim cemetery. When they got there, the appellant [Lahis] ordered the Arabs to be taken into one of the rooms and there he commanded them to stand in a line with their faces to the wall... The appellant then shot the Arabs with the Sten [gun] he held and emptied two clips on them. After the people fell, the appellant checked the bodies and observed whether there was life in them. Some of them still showed signs of life and the appellant then fired additional shots into them.”

Lahis stated in his defense that he had operated in the spirit of the battalion commander, who told him that “there is no need to burden intelligence [personnel] with captives.” He explained that he felt a powerful need for revenge because of the death of his friends, even though his victims had not taken part in the fighting. He was sentenced to seven years in prison; on appeal the

prison term was reduced to one year. He served it in quite comfortable conditions in a military base in the north.

Over the years, the judges offered various explanations for the light sentence. Judge Gideon Eilat justified the sentence by noting that Lahis was the only person brought to trial, even though graver murders had been committed. Judge Chaim Dvorin said, “As a judge it was difficult for me to come to terms with a situation in which we are sitting behind a table and judging a person who behaved during battle as he behaved. Could he have known at the time who was innocent and who was an enemy?”

Following his release, Lahis was pardoned by President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. Three decades later he was appointed director general of the Jewish Agency. In that capacity he conceived the idea of Jerusalem Day, commemorating the re-unification of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, which has since been marked annually.

Deir Yassin

Millions of documents from the state's founding are stored in government archives, and banned from publication. On top of this there is active censorship. In recent years personnel

of the Malmab unit (Hebrew acronym for “director of security of the defense establishment”) have been scouring archives around the country and removing evidence of war crimes, as an investigative report by Hagar Shezaf in Haaretz revealed in 2019. However, despite the efforts at concealment, the accounts of about massacres continue to accumulate.

The groundwork was laid by the historian Benny Morris, who conducted comprehensive, pioneering research in archives, starting in the 1980s. To this was later added the work of another historian, Adel Manna, whose focus is oral history and who studied the history of the Arabs of Haifa and the Galilee. Manna described, among other events, the execution squad that massacred nine residents of Majd al-Krum (his own birthplace). Additional publications over the years, such as the testimonies reported here, are gradually filling in the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Morris recorded 24 massacres during the 1948 war. Today it can be said that the number is higher, standing at several dozen cases. In some of them a few individuals were murdered, in others dozens, and there are also cases of more than a hundred victims. With the exception of the massacre in Deir Yassin, in April 1948, which has resonated widely over the years, this gloomy slice of history appears to have been repressed and pushed aside from the Israeli public discourse.

Among the major massacres that took place during Operations Hiram and Yoav were the events in the village

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of Saliha, Safsaf and Al-Dawayima. In Saliha (today Kibbutz Yiron), which lay close to the border with Lebanon, the 7th Brigade executed between 60 and 80 inhabitants using a method that was employed a number of times in the war: concentrating residents in a building in the village and then blowing up the structure with the people inside.

In Safsaf (today Moshav Safsufa), near Safed, soldiers from the 7th Brigade massacred dozens of inhabitants. According to one testimony (subsequently reclassified by the Malmab unit), “Fifty-two men were caught, tied them to one another, dug a pit and shot them. Ten were still twitching. Women came, begged for mercy. Found bodies of 6 elderly men. There were 61 bodies. 3 cases of rape.”

In the village of Al-Dawayima (today Moshav Amatzia), in the Lachish District, troops of the 8th Brigade massacred about 100 people. A soldier who witnessed the events described to Mapam officials what happened: “There was no battle and no resistance. The first conquerors killed 80 to 100 Arab men, women and children. The children were killed by smashing their skulls with sticks. There wasn't a house without people killed in it.” According to an intelligence officer who was posted to the village two days later, the number of those killed stood at 120.

An article published by an anonymous soldier in the journal Ner after the war indicates that the phenomenon of killing non-combatants was widespread in the IDF. The writer related how his comrades in the unit had murdered an elderly Arab woman who remained behind during the conquest of the village of Lubiya, in Lower Galilee: “This became a fashion. And when I complained to the battalion commander about what was going on, and asked him to put a stop to the rampage, which has no military justification, he shrugged his shoulders and said that ‘there is no order from above’ to prevent it. Since then the battalion just descended further down the slope. Its military achievements continued, but on the other hand the atrocities multiplied.”

‘This is a Jewish question’

In November-December 1948, when the war pressure had abated somewhat, the government turned to discussing the reports of massacres, which reached ministers in different ways. A perusal of the minutes of these meetings leaves no room for doubt: The country's top leaders knew in real time about the blood-drenched events that accompanied the conquest of the Arab villages.

In fact, the minutes of cabinet meetings from this period were made available for public perusal as early as 1995. However, the sections of the discussions that were devoted to “the army's behavior in the Galilee and the Negev” – the term on the cabinet's agenda – remained redacted and censored until only a few days ago. The present report was made possible following a request to the state archivist made by the Akevot Institute. Even now, the transcripts are not



Operation Hiram. Within 30 hours, dozens of villages in the Galilee were conquered.

Boris Carmi / Meitar Collection / National Library of Israel



Arab residents flee the Galilee toward Lebanon. Fred Csasznik

available in full. It is evident that the direct mentions of war crimes remain redacted. However, the exchanges between the ministers about the question of whether to investigate the crimes or not – exchanges that were concealed for 73 years – are now available to researchers, journalists and curious citizens. Here, for example, is what the cabinet meeting of November 7, 1948, sounded like:

Minister of Immigration and Health Haim-Moshe Shapira (Hapoel Hamizrachi): “To go that far is forbidden even in times of war. These matters have come up more than once in cabinet meetings, and the defense minister investigated and demanded, and orders were given. I believe that in order to create the impression that we take this matter very seriously, we must choose a committee of ministers who will travel to those places and see for themselves what happened. People who commit these acts must be punished. The matter was not a secret. My proposal is to choose a committee of three ministers who will address the gravity of the matter.”

Interior Minister Yitzhak Gruenbaum (General Zionists): “I too intended to ask a question along these lines. I have learned that an order exists to cleanse the territory.” At this point Gruenbaum tells about an officer who transported residents in a bus to enemy lines, where they were expelled, and adds, “But apparently others lack the same intelligence and the same feeling. Apparently the order can be executed by other means.”

At this point many lines are redacted. Labor Minister Mordechai Bentov (Mapam): “The people who did this claimed they had received orders in this spirit. It seems to me that we have not been as helpless about any issue as we are, apparently, about this issue. In my opinion this is not an Arab question, it is a Jewish question. The question is which Jews will remain in the country after the war. I see no way but to eradicate the evil with a strong hand. As we have not seen that strong hand in [army] headquarters or in the Defense Ministry, I support Mr. Shapira’s proposal for a committee to be chosen, which will be given the authority by the government to investigate every person it wishes. It’s necessary to investigate the chains of command, who received orders from whom, how things are being done without written orders. These things are done according to a particular method. It turns out that an order is one thing and procedure another.”

Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion (Mapai): “If they flee, there is no need to run after them.

However, it is different with regard to residents who remain in their places and our armies chase them away. That can be prevented. There is no need to chase them away. In Lod and Ramle explicit orders were given not to chase away the inhabitants and it turned out that they were forced [to leave]. I wanted to go to Lod in the first days after the conquest, and I was given a few excuses as to why I shouldn’t go. The first time I accepted them naively. A more serious matter is that of the theft. The situation in that regard is horrible.”

‘Fools’ paradise

The November 7, 1948, meeting ended with a decision to appoint a committee of three ministers to examine the testimony about massacres. The committee consisted of Haim-Moshe Shapira, Bentov and Justice Minister Pinhas Rosenbluth (Rosen), from the Progressive Party. A week later they informed the cabinet that the meager powers they had been given did not enable them to get to the truth of the matter. Three more days passed, and the cabinet met again to discuss the investigation of the crimes.

‘When... I asked [the battalion commander] to put a stop to the rampage... he shrugged his shoulders and said that ‘there is no order from above’ to prevent it. Since then the battalion’s... military achievements continued, but... the atrocities multiplied.’

Bentov: “It is known to me that there are circles in the army who want to sabotage the government’s decisions.”

Shapira: “We must find the best way to stop the plague. The situation in this matter is like a plague. Today the committee heard one witness, and I buried my face in my hands, in shame and disgrace. If this is the situation, I don’t know from which side a greater danger exists to the state – from the side of the Arabs or from our own side. In my opinion, all our moral foundations have been undermined and we need to

look for ways to curb these instincts. We have reached this state of affairs because we did not know how to control things when this first started. My impression is that we are living in a fools’ paradise. If no shift occurs, then we are undermining the government’s moral basis with our own hands.”

Agriculture Minister Aharon Zisling (Mapam): “I received a letter from a certain person about this matter. I have to tell you that I knew about the situation in this matter, and I placed the subject on this table more than once. After reading the letter I received, I couldn’t sleep the whole night. I felt that something was being done that was affecting my soul, the soul of my home and the soul of all of us here. I could not imagine where we had come from and where we are going. I know that this is not a chance thing but something that determines the nation’s standards of life. I know that this could have consequences in every area of our life. One transgression generates another, and this matter becomes people’s second nature.”

Police Minister Bechor-Shalom Sheetrit (Sefardim and Oriental Communities): “Already in the first days of the People’s Administration [pre-May 1948 temporary legislative body], I demanded a stringent approach on this matter, and you didn’t listen to me. You are overwrought about their grave deeds. I put forward several proposals on this subject, and to this day not one of them has been accepted.”

Transportation Minister David Remez (Mapai): “We have slid down a terrible slope – true, not the whole army, but if there are deeds like these and they are recurring in quite a few places, they are undoubtedly horrific to the point of despair.”

Following the discussion, Ben-Gurion declared incisively: “Since the committee did not fulfill the role it was tasked with, it is hereby abolished.” To which Gruenbaum retorted, “We are burying the matter.” Minister Shapira, who had been the one to call for the committee in the first place, commented that he felt the earth give way beneath his feet.

In fact, the ministers grasped very quickly that the prime minister had no interest in a through investigation of war crimes. He refused to grant the committee of three the authority to subpoena witnesses, and blamed its members’ laziness for its failure. Whereas some ministers demanded the establishment of a committee with teeth and urged that those responsible be brought to justice, Ben-Gurion pulled in a completely opposite direction. The meeting ended with the following decision: “The

government assigns to the prime minister [responsibility for] investigating all of the claims made about the army’s behavior vis-a-vis Arabs in the Galilee and the south.”

Two days after the meeting, on November 19, 1948, he appointed the attorney general, Yaakov-Shimshon Shapira, to investigate the events. The prime minister noted in the letter of appointment that the attorney general “is hereby requested to take it on himself to examine and investigate whether harm was inflicted by soldiers and the army on the life of Arab residents of the Galilee and the south, which was not in accordance with the accepted rules of war.”

Two weeks later, the attorney general submitted his report to the prime minister. In the cabinet meeting of December 5, Ben-Gurion read out its main points, but this section of the minutes remains redacted. In the 1980s, historian Morris petitioned the High Court of Justice, requesting that the report be made available to him, but the petition was rejected. The Akevot Institute has been working for several years to have the report declassified.

The report is mentioned only a few times in the academic literature – so few that some have questioned its very existence. The historian Yoav Gelber, the author of one of the most informative books about the War of Independence (“Independence Versus Nakbah: The Arab-Israeli War of 1948,” in Hebrew), wrote that he did not find “Shapira’s investigative report or any reference to it, or any other evidence to the effect that an investigation was conducted in the matter of the irregular actions that took place in the Galilee.” Nevertheless, the report does exist, and the minutes now made available show that the cabinet ministers were not at all pleased with its content or its recommendations.

After reading out the main points of the report to the cabinet, Ben-Gurion said, “I do not accept everything he [Shapira] wrote, but I think he has done something important and has said things that others would not have dared say.” He then took the opportunity to criticize his fellow cabinet members. “Of course, it’s easy to sit here around this table and cast blame on a small number of people, on those who fought.”

Haim-Moshe Shapira: “The attorney general has indeed presented a report from what he was told, but that is not his job. In my opinion, the only thing that it’s still possible to do, is to select on behalf of the government a public committee that will investigate the matter and go fully into its details. But if these deeds

The public at large appears not to have been disturbed by any of this. The philosopher Martin Buber termed the frame of mind that dominated Jewish society at the time a ‘war psychosis.’

are covered up, the blame lies with the entire government if it does not bring the offenders to justice.”

Remez: “These deeds remove us from the category of Jews and from the category of human beings altogether. Precisely on these grave matters we have been silent to this day. We must find a way to put a stop to these deeds, but we must not silence our conscience by placing the whole gravity of the blame on boys who were dragged in the wake of deeds that were done earlier.”

Bentov: “People get used to the fact of turning away and start to understand: there is no justice and no judge.”

Code of silence

Throughout the cabinet meetings, there were several mentions of a code of silence existing among soldiers about war crimes. Minister Shapira stated: “The fact is that the soldiers are afraid to testify. I asked one soldier whether he would be willing to appear before the committee. He asked me not to mention his name, to forget that he spoke with me and to consider him someone who doesn’t know a thing.”

Ben-Gurion also addressed the difficulty of breaching the circle of silence: “In regard to the Galilee, a few things have been published. Not all the rumors fit the facts. Several things have been confirmed. What happened in Dawayima cannot be confirmed. There is a cover-up. The matter of the cover-up is extremely serious. I assigned someone to conduct a clarification about a certain matter, and an organized operation was mounted against him not to do the clarification. He was under great pressure.” Ben-Gurion asserted that it was impossible to ascertain the truth, not in the north and not in the south. He added that in the Negev, “deeds were done that are no less shocking than the deeds in the Galilee.”

The code of silence helped those who wished to sweep the crimes un-

der the carpet and avoid investigations and indictments. Indeed, Shmuel Lahis, the commander of the unit that perpetrated the Hula massacre, was among the few who were accused of murder in the War of Independence. Not even the Al-Dawayima massacre, which was investigated internally by the IDF, produced indictments.

The intensity of the cover-up in the army comes through in a book by Yosef Shai-El, a soldier in Lahis’ company, who testified in the trial against his former commander. In his unpublished memoir from 2005, “The First Eighty Years of My Life,” Shai-El writes: “After the trial verdict was handed down, I went through hard times for a while. People would grab me in cafés and various places in the city and hit me. I made it a habit to go out with a pistol in my pocket. I’d found the pistol in an abandoned house in Acre long before. Everyone knew I was a sniper, and I enjoyed quiet for some time. The police informed my father that there was a plan to kidnap me from the house, and I hid in a friend’s home.”

Even those who did not have the benefit of silence and a cover-up, and were tried for crimes committed in the war, were finally let off the hook. In February 1949 a retroactive general pardon was issued for any crimes committed during the war. The public at large appears not to have been disturbed by any of this. The events described above took place during the period when the military justice system was being created. This might explain why the military internalized an organizational culture that goes easy on the killing of Palestinians by soldiers during operations. The philosopher Martin Buber termed the frame of mind that dominated Jewish society at the time a “war psychosis.”

Half a year later, the first Speaker of the Knesset, Joseph Sprinzak, appeared before the parliament’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Mentioned in the meeting were two items that had appeared in the press that day, which epitomized the attitude toward the acts of murder during the war. One report referred to an officer who during the fighting had ordered the murder of four wounded individuals; the second report was about a person who sold stolen army equipment. The former was sentenced to six months in prison, the latter to three years. Sprinzak, in any event, was under no illusions. “We are far from humanism,” he told the committee. “We are like all the nations.”

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TRIANGLE

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“I love places like this, it’s like living under the bridge of a subway, as though unworthy of human habitation, extremely noisy. But just move away the dirt, the dust and the soot for a minute and you’ll see an astonishing corner,” he says. “Just from my sofa, I’ve observed 23 species of birds. A swarm of bees landed outside and it turned out that I have a beehive on my property. I’m not harvesting honey yet, but the hive is bringing everything to life here. I saw fireflies here for the first time; I’d never seen any before in my life. There are wonderful things under the dust.”

Sounds utopian. But there’s no way that in a place like this you don’t end up having to fight the system a little.

“Obviously. I’m at war with Netivei Ayalon. Three months ago, a digger machine showed up at 6 A.M. and started to pound a cement wall 20 meters from me. By law, you’re allowed to work [in construction] from 7. You woke me up? Okay, the campaign has started. I called the police, 106 [municipal hotline], and the community relations representative and CEO of Netivei Ayalon. I went out with

a megaphone and shouted, ‘Stop, man! You’re not allowed to work until 7!’ The guy is dumbfounded. He turns off the engine. The police officer I summoned arrives, speaks to him, leaves. Quiet. At 6:36 another digger enters the neighborhood. I’m standing on the road in underwear with a megaphone, and he stops by the side. At around 6:50 the foreman shows up, speaks to me with hand gestures, like the neighborhood is his own personal construction site, and says, ‘I am allowed to work before 7.’ I sit down in the digger’s bucket and say, ‘Well, there’s no work, ask the police about me.’ They call the police, and who shows up? The officer I summoned at 6:20.

“Half an hour earlier I looked like a normal citizen to him, and now I’m sitting on a digger in my underpants and I fire away at him: ‘What’s your name, what’s your rank, what’s your serial number?’ And he says, ‘I’ve come to solve the problem for you.’ A community relations representative of Netivei Ayalon arrives and with the officer gathers the workers together and gives them a briefing. They didn’t start work until 7:40. So what’s the moral of the story?”

That every neighborhood needs a Yigal Rambam.

While Yigal was telling his story, Elijah Babai, 30, third-generation Ludwipollian, came into the yard. I asked

him what he thinks will happen to the neighborhood. “There’s been talk of evacuation since I was born,” he says. “I remember that when I was 6 my mother said to my father, ‘Let’s renovate the kitchen,’ and my father replied that it would be a waste, because everything was about to be demolished. The same thing happened when my father himself was a kid. So somewhere else, I could believe that it’s final, but in this neighborhood nothing is ever final.”

In the meantime we are joined by 44-year-old Gal Elam and by Maya Schlesinger, 35, who have lived here for six years. “We are both Tel Avivans originally, and it was odd to us that we didn’t know the street, so we used Waze, and when we got here, we were surprised to discover that there’s a neighborhood here,” Maya says.

Elijah: “My friends also get confused – even with Waze it’s hard to get here. Some have gone all the way to the airport.”

Gal: “Maya’s friends ended up mistakenly in Azor [a small town southeast of Tel Aviv] at least five times.”

Maya: “There were also friends who gave up along the way and went back home. Wolt [food] delivery people, too.”

Maybe the Ludwipol triangle is Wolt’s Bermuda Triangle.

Maya: “Domino’s [Pizza] doesn’t recognize us at all. We called customer



One of the houses in Ludwipol. “It’s like living under the bridge of a subway, as though unworthy of human habitation,” says Rambam. “But just move away the dirt, dust and soot and you’ll see an astonishing corner.”

Tomer Appelbaum

service and asked them to recognize Ludwipol. It didn’t help.”

Elijah: “Try to order a pizza from Domino’s online. You’ll get switched from the Yad Eliahu branch to Givatayim and in the end they’ll say there are no deliveries.”

Yigal: “They deliver to me. I got to the manager, I nagged them.”

Elijah: “That’s fine for a guy like Yigal Rambam who wages social struggles, but what about someone like me? Just switch to Pizza Hut, it’s just as good.”

Tell me, do your houses move, too?

Elijah: “The houses move, they move. Pictures, tiles, whatever. In my work as a renovator I check construction materials out on these walls, I do tests on materials to see what is durable and what isn’t.”

Gal: “The houses move, and that is definitely not suitable for everyone. You get up in the morning, you go outside and you see that a tile has moved a bit farther away from the front door. There are vibrations here from the Ayalon that you don’t feel; the house is quiet but it’s moving all the time. Think of it like this: On planet Earth you’re in motion all the time, so here you feel the rotation a little more.”

Elijah: “Other than two families, no one here has kids. Call the city officials and tell them you’re from here, see how they answer you. Bureaucracy is clearly defined, and here you don’t belong to any place, you’re on the margins.”

In what other ways do you feel that?

“They do what they want with you. They expropriate a bit of the garden, put a road on top of you, whatever they want.”

Yigal: “You know what the head of the Netivei Ayalon sanitation unit said to me? ‘I thought only old people live here.’”

Elijah: “I hang laundry on the roof. Let’s say I forget to take the clothes off the rope for a whole day – they turn black.”