

A. D. Gordon: "Tolstoy in Palestine"

Like Tolstoy, you longed to connect your life
of the soil.

You turned your back
on property, family, the high culture of Russia --
to live with peasants,
to work the vineyards and orange groves of Rishon Le-Zion.

Your stamina stunned the younger men
and women who worked beside you.
Your labor connected you to the land of your people.
It made you free.

Turning your back on the occupations of the Pale--
Talmudic scholar, money lender,
peddler, victim of pogroms--
You wanted to remake the Jew into a farmer.

Your weapon against history was the hoe--
Your work in the fields a new kind of worship.

With each digging of the hoe--
you discovered a new rung upon which to climb to heaven.

The sweat bathed your white beard.
Your eyes burned with the fire of holiness.
Tolstoy in Palestine,
you scribbled "Some Observations"
by candlelight in the predawn hours--
"our people," you wrote, "can be rejuvenated
through labor and a life close to nature."

At night, under the moon of Zion,
beside the campfire,
you preached your religion of labor
to all who would listen.
And when the dreamers of Israel
sang and danced,
you joined them
in the hora of the body reborn.

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