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## **Kibbutz : 100 years of communal life in Israel**

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The *Kibbutz* (plural *Kibbutzim*) is a special type of a rural community in Israel, which has attempted to create and maintain an egalitarian community with shared ownership of its means of production and consumption. The guiding principle was “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. Spatial structure and the housing have reflected the *Kibbutz* ideology and have changed, with it, over time.

The first *Kibbutz*, Degania on the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, was founded in 1910. A hundred years later, there are 277 *Kibbutzim*, most of them founded by *Halutzim* (pioneers) in the 1930's and 1940's before the establishment of the State of Israel. In each there are 50-1500 members, usually about 200-500. They are dispersed throughout the country, primarily in the Galilee (north) and the Negev (south). In 1950 they accounted for about 5% of the Israeli population; in 2010 about 140,000 live in *Kibbutzim*, 1.8% of Israel's 7.8 million citizens.

The *Kibbutz* has attracted considerable international attention, because it has been a unique experiment in maintaining an egalitarian community for several generations, and because it played an important role in the building of a new nation and state. After a deep demographic and economic crisis, the *Kibbutzim* seem to succeed in regenerating themselves in the early 2000s.

### **LIFE IN THE KIBBUTZ (1910-1970s)**

#### **Communal Life**

##### A voluntary and democratic association

The *Kibbutz* is a voluntary association of individuals. Every person declared his/her wish to be a member and then had to be accepted by consensus or a large majority of the members.

This also applies to children born in the *Kibbutz* who make their own decision when they reach maturity, and are then accepted.

The first *kibbutzim* were formed by groups of young and single individuals, usually educated, who arrived at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at what they considered to be their ancient homeland, following persecution of Jewish communities in their Eastern European countries of origin. With time, the groups expanded in number and size, joined by youngsters from all the Zionist youth movements, as well as refugees from World War II.

A strong sense of mission guided the founders, a belief that they were creating a better “world order” of justice and solidarity, at least for the Jews, if not for the universe. Their nightly discussions gradually mutated into The General Assembly, in which all members of the *Kibbutz* were expected to participate for each meeting. All decisions were brought to the Assembly, even decisions that would be considered as private, such as going on to higher education and what to study.

Equality was the name of the game. The decision-making body that discussed all issues and brought them to the Assembly included the secretary general (*Mazkir*), treasurer (*Gizbar*), economic coordinator (*Merakez Meshek*) and representatives of the community. These decision-makers were elected for a term and the expectation was for rotation every two-three years. No one was expected to specialize and stay for long in management jobs.

### Child rearing

Children were reared collectively, not by their parents. From their very first day they lived in the Children Home, including sleeping time and all meals. Parents were usually allowed to spend up to two hours a day with them, in the late afternoon. Theoretically (a) this enabled women to work like men; (b) trained care-takers would provide better communal education than parents; (c) children and parents would be less selfish. Numerous studies and even novels have been devoted to analyzing and reflecting on this special system and its results, a system that lasted until the 1970's and 1980's. In 1997 Bar'am was the last *Kibbutz* to move to “family sleeping”.

From kindergarten on, cooperation and work for the benefit of the collective were emphasized. The children's society itself functioned as a mini-Kibbutz. Elementary schools were usually on the *Kibbutz* premises, while older children attended a regional school serving several *kibbutzim*, in order to experience a broader range of academic subjects and social contacts.

It was hoped that all the children would remain in the *Kibbutz*, and there was deep disappointment when this did not happen. Only about one-third of the children stayed for their entire life. Most *Kibbutz* members of today grew up there and decided to stay.

### Social and cultural life

All aspects of social life were expected to be experienced communally, from meals in the public dining hall several times a day to listening to music. In the 1950's, there were bitter discussions couples owing tea-kettles, for fear that less time would be spent socializing in the community's dining hall.

In spite of the material austerity, cultural life was not neglected and local artists found ways to express themselves. Since the 1960s, acknowledged artists got three days a week for artistic work instead of regular work in the *Kibbutz*. Artists created elaborated ceremonies for holidays, celebrated together with all adults and children of the *Kibbutz*. These communal celebrations were secular substitutes for the religious work that the founders of the *Kibbutz* left behind when they departed their original families.

### Gender roles

In the early days, there was a clear majority of young men in the *Kibbutzim*. The few women shared many of the tasks in the fields and even in guard duties. However, women only performed the traditional female roles of cooking, cleaning and working in the Children Home. Thus, women adopted "muscular roles", with no corresponding adoption of "feminine roles" by men.

### **Work and Economics**

#### Disconnecting work and material rewards

Work stood at the heart of the *Kibbutz* ethos. Writers used the term "the religion of work", referring to the ultimate command to work as best as one can, and to see one's work (usually manual) as the main expression of self fulfillment, an individual expression implemented only by contributing to the collective goals.

Every work had equal value. Adults and children were evaluated by their devotion to work, but there was no connection between the amount or kind of work and material rewards. This unique disconnection demarcated the *Kibbutz* as an egalitarian society for at least the first 50 years, but it has, very gradually, changed.

#### Rejection of private property

Members of the *Kibbutz* had neither private money nor private property. This was a salient expression of their socialism. Even clothing was owned by the community. Income and gifts received from the outside were handed over to common ownership. When the *Kibbutz* started buying a few cars, they were used by certain position holders during the week, while on *Shabbat*, members took turns to visit friends or to go for rides outside the *Kibbutz*.

## Employment and sources of livelihood

Do-it-yourself and refrain from employing hired labor, because it meant exploitation of one's human brothers and sisters, were the rules of the game for many years. For the first 30-40 years, the economy was based mainly on agriculture, in accordance with the original idea of "return to the land". Autarkic farming was the aspired ideal. Indeed, almost from the beginning, there were a few industrial initiatives, but it was not until the 1960s that industry became a significant source of livelihood. By 1981, there were 320 industrial plants in the *kibbutzim*, a few with innovative technology such as smart drip irrigation solutions, but many more traditional industries related to agriculture products and to plastics. Employment was also to be found in the various community and personal services.

The various *Kibbutzim* were organized in four "*kibbutz* movements", each highly devoted to its own political ideology. These "movements" played an important role in national politics, and also in the economy of the *Kibbutzim*. Jointly, they purchased and marketed products and founded regional industrial plants. Salaries of the few who worked outside were paid to directly to the *Kibbutz* treasury.

## **Spatial Structure and Housing**

### Planning and Ideology

The founders of the *Kibbutzim*, educated young persons with architects among them, tried to implement the values of equality, simple life and as-full-as-possible communality in planning their surroundings. A few, including Arie Sharom and Shmuel Mestechkin, were graduates of the Bauhaus school that shaped Modernist Architecture and endeavored to create "a new person". They believed that architecture should not merely mirror society but should play an active role in shaping the lives of its users.

### Housing

In the early days, all *Kibbutz* members lived in one room, or sometimes in two rooms divided by gender, with no privacy at all. Communal toilets and showers, one for men and one for women, were outside. The next step was rooms for 4 persons (3 square meters per person) with communal wash-places as above. For decades there were no apartments in the *Kibbutzim*, just small cells/rooms, each for 2-4 individuals or for a couple.

The evolution of housing patterns has been closely related to changes in the *Kibbutz* ideology and attitudes towards the individual and the family, changing slowly from maximum communality to emphasizing privacy and family. Washrooms in members' rooms were installed some 30 years after the establishment of the first *Kibbutzim*. Later, families received small dwelling units with two rooms and an eating corner, which meant that children could

sometimes have a light meal with their parents rather than in the Children Home. But it was not until the family was allowed to sleep together in the 1980s or 1990s that dwelling units in the *Kibbutzim* developed into regular small apartments with a living space, parents' separate space and a children's space, with their own washroom and kitchenette. The expansion was frequently made by adding a second floor to the old unit. Eating at home became popular for breakfast and supper, but the hot meal remained in the Kibbutz's dining hall.

This process of development created areas with very different levels of housing. In the 1940s, the recommended area per family was 180 sq feet 28 units per acre; in the early 1990s it reached 900 sq feet with 8 units per acre. This inequality was treated through principles of internal migration: young singles and new families lived in the old stock; having several children entitled a member to a larger unit and veteran members were allowed to move into the higher-standard units.

### The spatial setting

The average *kibbutz* area - without the agriculture fields - is 75-100 acres and it includes two separated parts: the larger social area there is housing for adults, a living area of the children and the nucleus of the *Kibbutz*, the dining hall and the big lawn nearby; the smaller section comprises the farmyard, workshops, and later also industry. A concentric layout enables easy access, with walking distances of up to 10 minutes from living quarters to dining hall. If and when the number of members increases beyond the original plan, a combination of concentric circles and radian segments is preferred. Initially, planting flowers and trees was considered as excessive luxuries, but passionate gardeners cultivated them nonetheless. Spaces between buildings were gradually transformed into the common garden of the extended family/community of the *Kibbutz*.

The *Kibbutzim* are frequently located in remote areas or adjacent to the borders of Israel; security considerations necessitated building an actual fence around their compound, in addition to the ideological fence that partitioned them from communities around them, thus creating gated communities. Usually, there is just one gate to enter the *Kibbutz* and one narrow road for cars from the gate to a parking area near the dining hall. Movement inside the *Kibbutz* is mainly on foot. Along the paved paths one can also see bicycles, large strollers with several babies and *Kalno'iyot*, kind of golf carts adapted for use by elderly persons. This built environment is constantly changing in parallel with the ideological changes in the *Kibbutz*.

## **CRISIS AND CHANGE**

In the 1980s, Israel coped with a crisis in its banking system and an inflationary spiral that peaked in 1984. The economic situation of many *Kibbutzim*, which had undergone

economic difficulties, hit bottom. There were former economic crises in the Kibbutzim, but of lower intensity, and the government intervened and covered much of their debts. This time, the crisis was more severe and the external situation also changed. The continuous dominance of the socialistic political parties in Israel terminated in the 1977 elections, and the *Kibbutzim* stood exposed after losing much of their political strength.

In an attempt to rehabilitate the economy and to curb the wave of out-migration of second- and third-generation of members, most of the *Kibbutzim* introduced major changes in their mode of life. Gradually, legitimacy was accorded to employment outside the Kibbutz, to pursuing higher education by personal choice, and to some private property. These steps did not suffice to calm the storm. In the shadow of the economic-financial crisis, accusations were leveled at the principle of equality, which created parasitism and waste, and which did not motivate introduction of economic innovation and excellence. In 1991, a quarter of the *Kibbutzim* were virtually bankrupt, and this rate exceeded one half in the early 2000s. The economic disaster fed a social demographic crisis: out-migration of the young increased, birth-rate declined and the percentage of elderly reached an average of 25%. Most *Kibbutzim* had no pension funds, thus increasing the severity of their situation.

In one Kibbutz after the other, accompanied by grave debates and conflicts, four types of significant changes were frequently accepted: (a) differential salaries according to type of work; (b) semi-privatization of *Kibbutz* services, i.e., payment (subsidized) for eating in the dining hall, laundry, etc., sometimes cancellation of the communal dining and every so often daring to require partial payment for education and health services; (c) a gradual ongoing process of privatization of the housing units and transfer of assets from communal to private ownership, sometimes like sharing stocks of the *kibbutz* business; (d) about half of the *Kibbutzim* responded to the demographic crisis by opening up their communities to selected residents who are not *Kibbutz* members but enjoy its services for full payment.

#### RECOVERY AND REGENERATION

After years of discussion among the *kibbutz* movements, the banks and the Ministry of Finance, an agreement was signed in 1996 regarding the debts of the *kibbutzim*. This agreement aroused criticism among the Israeli public, in that it favored the *kibbutz* sector just when many urban industries had collapsed. Yet, in the *kibbutzim*, on which heavy payments had been imposed for years, it was a cause for disappointment and “brain drain”; many of the skilled workers preferred to quit the communal effort; they left the *Kibbutz* even though they had just a small “quitting grant” to start their life with. At the

same time, most *kibbutzim* were forced to adopt better and more professional management methods and have gradually recovered. By 2010, their financial crisis had almost disappeared. Today, numerous *kibbutzim* accept new members, many of them offspring who have “come home”. The birth rate is increasing, and the number of old people declining. Less than 2% of Israel’s population lives in *kibbutzim*, but they produce 30% of the country’s agricultural produce and 9% of the industrial product. However, the economic differences among *kibbutzim* are expanding.

The government set up a public committee to determine the legal status of the *kibbutzim*. The Committee rejected the idea of changing the title “*kibbutz*” as applied to communities with differential salaries and privatization processes. In 2004, two typologies were approved by the government: the “cooperative *kibbutz*”, which remains faithful to the original principles, and the “renewed *kibbutz*”, which approves private ownership, outside-the-Kibbutz employment, reconnecting type of employment and salary, small businesses within the *kibbutz*, and other changes, but preserves certain communal ideas, in particular: participatory democracy – general votes are taken on all important decisions, and a special majority is required; mutual obligation – a socio-economic safety net for each adult and child, which is maintained by all members and they contribute a large percentage of their income for this purpose. In 2011, less than one quarter of the 277 *kibbutzim* is “cooperative”, most of them relatively prosperous or religiously orthodox, while the other 75% define themselves as “renewed *kibbutz*”.

One hundred years after its establishment, the *kibbutz* movement has changed. The walls dividing the *kibbutzim* from society have been lowered to a great extent. The physical shape is about to change, as the *kibbutz* yard is partitioned into private lots, and the communal institutions at the center are changing their function and form. The *Kibbutz* movement is diversifying; there are even a few urban *kibbutzim* in Israel, as well as attempts to create *kibbutzim* in other countries. The “renewed *kibbutz*” is a vastly different entity from the original conception, but, by comparison with other sectors of Israeli society, socio-economic differences are smaller, and mutual obligation still prevails. Only time can tell if this is a sustainable new order, which enables fulfilling the goals of social solidarity and participatory democracy in a capitalist reality.

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