

KIBBUTZ AS UTOPIA: SOCIAL SUCCESS AND POLITICAL FAILURE

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The kibbutz, a collective Jewish settlement in pre-state Palestine and then in Israel, is the longest-lasting experiment in building and maintaining a utopian society in modern times. The first kibbutz was founded in Ottoman-ruled Palestine prior to World War I by a handful of young Jewish men and women who had immigrated to the country not too long before. Later on, more and more kibbutzim (the Hebrew plural of kibbutz) were founded, and in the late 1920s they grouped into three countrywide kibbutz movements affiliated with socialist-Zionist parties and were part of the Jewish Labor Movement in Palestine.¹ In 1948, when the State of Israel was founded, about 45,000 people lived in kibbutzim, constituting almost 7.5 percent of the young state's Jewish population. At present (2018) about 171,000 people (around 2 percent of the state's population) are living in 265 kibbutzim.² Up to a certain point, and no doubt until the establishment of Israel, the kibbutz's share in the Zionist enterprise greatly exceeded its demographic size (in both absolute and relative terms).³ In the last three decades, most kibbutzim have undergone some major transformations, falling generally under the term of privatization, in an effort to adapt to changes in the world around them and to find answers to undercurrents from within.

This essay deals mainly with traditional kibbutz as it existed until the economic crisis of the mid-1980s. It covers a period of about three-quarters of the twentieth century, during which kibbutz maintained most of its original features, commonly regarded as utopian. This essay argues that the kibbutz, indeed, succeeded in establishing and maintaining a society with utopian components, but the story is quite different when viewed from a political perspective and analyzed in political terms. The kibbutz, which was part of the socialist wing of the Zionist movement, did not succeed in constituting an avant-garde for creating a new Jewish society in Palestine functioning according to its utopian ideals, and never evolved into a substantial political power in Israel. In other words, the success of the kibbutz as utopia was confined to the social sphere only, and not to the political one; and their social achievements were limited almost exclusively to the kibbutzim themselves, only partially and indirectly spreading out into the society at large.

1 A fourth kibbutz movement centers around a religious way of life and political affiliation and will not be dealt with in this essay, because the religious factor requires further elaboration than the present discussion would allow. For a short discussion of this matter, see Ran Abramitzky, *The Mystery of the Kibbutz: Egalitarian Principles in a Capitalist World* (Princeton and London, 2018), 280-81. This book, focusing on the economic aspects of the kibbutz with traces of personal and familial experience, was published during the last stages of working on this essay.

2 There are no exact data concerning the number of members of kibbutzim at present because it is not easy to ascertain various residents' status within them; there is some fluidity between one status and another.

3 For a comprehensive history of the kibbutz, see Henry Near, *The Kibbutz Movement, A History* (Oxford, vol. 1, 1992; vol. 2, 1997).

The Traditional Kibbutz as a Utopian Society

Leading publications dealing with the kibbutz point to its utopian aspects and actually all writings about the kibbutz in historical and social perspectives relate to utopia as one of its basic characteristics. Many publications written about the kibbutz deal with its utopian features explicitly by including the word “utopia” in the title (the list here includes only titles published in English; there are, of course, many more written in Hebrew). Martin Buber devoted the epilogue of his book *Paths in Utopia* to the kibbutz, calling it “the experiment that did not fail.”⁴ A book published in the mid-1950s is titled: *Kibbutz: Venture in Utopia*;⁵ and a chapter in a book about the kibbutz is titled “From Utopia toward Modernization.”⁶ A recently published biography of one of the kibbutz movement’s leaders is titled: *Kibbutz: Utopia and Politics*,⁷ and the title of one of the best known books about the kibbutz, *The Children of the Dream*, evidently alludes to the utopian nature of the kibbutz.⁸

4 Martin Buber, “Epilogue — an Experiment That Did Not Fail,” *Paths in Utopia* (Syracuse, 1996), 139-50. First published in Hebrew in 1946; first published in English in 1949.

5 Spiro Melford, *Kibbutz: Venture in Utopia* (Cambridge, MA, 1956).

6 Paula Rayman, *The Kibbutz Community and Nation Building* (Princeton, 1981), 250-271.

7 Aviva Halalmish, *Kibbutz: Utopia and Politics: The Life and Times of Meir Yaari 1897-1987* (Boston, 2017).

8 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Children of the Dream* (London & New York, 1969).

9 Daniel Gavron, *The Kibbutz: Awakening from Utopia* (Lanham, MD, 2000).

10 Uri Zilbersheid, *The Israeli Kibbutz: From Utopia to Dystopia*, <https://libcom.org/library/israeli-kibbutz-utopia-dystopia-uri-zilbersheid>.

11 Uriel Leviatan, *Lessons from the Kibbutz as a Real Utopia*, <https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/ASA/Leviatan%20-%20Lessons%20from%20the%20kibbutz%20as%20real%20utopia.pdf>.

Books published in the twenty-first century, such as *The Kibbutz: Awakening from Utopia*,⁹ and *The Israeli Kibbutz: From Utopia to Dystopia*,¹⁰ deal with the utopian characteristics of the kibbutz as a matter of the past, in contradistinction to the present. But there are those who find the utopian aspects of the kibbutz still relevant in the present as well as for the future, such as *Lessons from the Kibbutz as a Real Utopia*.¹¹

Kibbutz founders sought to create a new type of society where all would be equal, and to foster a new human being who conformed to utopian ideals. Like other communes with a utopian orientation, the kibbutz was comprised of a group of people wishing to live in a society based on equality and cooperation. For about eight decades, they and their followers invented, developed, and maintained a unique way of life, which was comprised of a total social framework, encompassing all spheres of human society — economic, social and cultural. There were several principles guiding the construction of this framework, the most fundamental one being total, absolute equality among all members. The kibbutz fully and strictly implemented the rule “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” which eliminated the link between contribution and remuneration. Other practices of kibbutz life included communal ownership of the means of production, the abolition of private property and a wage system, self-sufficiency, freedom from exploitation and rejection of exploiting others, the primacy of the group over individual

interests, and communal child rearing, involving the separation of children and parents for most hours of the day and the entire night (with some exceptions).¹² The kibbutz was run as a comprehensive and direct democracy, and all along people joined kibbutzim of their own free will, without any coercion.

Studies of the changes that took place in the kibbutz since the mid-1980s further illuminate some of the utopian features of the traditional kibbutz, suggesting that its utopian features — such as equality, solidarity, democracy, fraternity among members, and concern for the well-being of individual members — eroded over time, so that, as communities, they have become much more similar to the outside world.

In its early years, the kibbutz vacillated between constituting a small, intimate, homogeneous, and selective commune living according to utopian ideals, a group whose intrinsic fraternity was both the goal and a way of life; and being a large, open and ever-growing collective, intended mainly to be a tool for achieving national and social aims. The small, intimate, and homogeneous kibbutz (the Hebrew term for this kind of kibbutz is *kevtzah*, which literally means “a group”) was a product of the Second Aliyah, a wave of Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the decade prior to World War I. The large and ever-growing kibbutz, which developed in the 1920s, had, of course, larger memberships and were willing to accept all newcomers, regardless of their background. In the later 1920s, a third type of Kibbutz emerged synthesizing the features of the initial two. This type was neither a small and intimate group, a secluded and isolated unit, focused on developing its own internal solidarity like the *kevtzah*, nor was it a large kibbutz aiming primarily to achieve national goals. Each kibbutz of the third type was small enough to preserve its intimate atmosphere, but, at the same time, large and robust enough to dispatch members to fulfill tasks in the outside world. This type of kibbutz incorporated revolutionary Marxism into its ideology, a matter to be further discussed below.

The Kibbutz as Part of the Jewish National Liberation Movement (Zionism)

The initial push for the establishment of kibbutzim was the failure of Jewish workers to compete with much cheaper Arab labor, and their understanding that they were unable to make a living as agricultural wage workers. The founders of the first kibbutzim were young men

¹² See Ora Aviezer, Marinus H. Van IJzendoorn, Abraham Sagi, and Carlo Scungel, “‘Children of the Dream’ Revisited: 70 Years of Collective Early Child Care in Israeli Kibbutzim,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 1 (1994): 99-116.

and women who originally wished to lay the foundations for a Jewish proletarian working class in Palestine. Facing the hardships of the local labor market, they soon became disillusioned. Instead, they established communal agricultural settlements, financially assisted by the Zionist Organization, a world-wide organization founded in 1897 aiming at establishing for the Jewish people a legally assured home in Palestine; and one of the means for the attainment of this purpose was the promotion of the settlement of Jewish agriculturists [farmers] in Palestine.

In the early years of the British rule in Palestine, which lasted from late 1917 to mid-1948, a sort of alliance was contracted between the Zionist Organization and the socialist Zionist movements. The Zionist Organization purchased the land and laid the infrastructure for future agricultural settlements, while the labor parties supplied the human resources — young graduates of their respective pioneering youth movements, most of whom came as immigrants from Eastern Europe and shouldered the mission of building the Jewish national home in Palestine.

Obviously, this alliance produced a mutual dependence. The kibbutz depended on national funds, and the Zionist movement relied largely on the kibbutz in matters of immigration absorption, establishing agricultural settlements and securing the Zionist enterprise in various military forms. In short, the kibbutz was an arm of a national liberation movement in a period of crisis, a period of national emergency, namely, the deteriorating situation of the Jews in Europe and the intensifying struggle between Jews and Arabs over Palestine.

From the very beginning, kibbutz ideology fused Zionism and socialism, although Zionism and its goals clearly and unequivocally took precedence. The emergence and durability of the kibbutz are actually unimaginable without the Zionist component: it comprised a part of a national liberation movement, whose values and objectives it shared, and it played an active part in efforts to realize them. The other side of the coin is the dependence of the kibbutz on the financial support of the Zionist Organization and of the Israeli government; the kibbutz could have not survived during the British Mandate period, and well into Israeli statehood, without external financial support.

At the beginning of the mandate period, the Zionist labor parties toyed with the idea of having the Jewish National Home in Palestine built exclusively with the means available to the Zionist Organization

and other public funds, with no need to rely on private capital. This delusion rested on the concept of a fundamental contradiction between Zionism and capitalism, since capitalists sought quick profits and, therefore, preferred to employ Arab laborers who were willing to accept lower wages than Jewish workers. The hope, or rather the wishful thinking, of building the Jewish national home with national and public funds was reinforced by the rising optimism in the early years of the mandate period, ignited by the Balfour Declaration (November 1917) regarding the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. The Zionists assumed that the Jewish people would rally to the cause and contribute vast sums to build the Jewish National Home. However, this hope dissipated quickly. The Zionist Organization expected to raise millions of pounds every year, but actually collected only a meager amount. Consequently, the Twelfth Zionist Congress (1921) decided that it was necessary to invest both national funds and private capital in building the Jewish National Home. Then, in 1924, the Fourth Aliya (a wave of Jewish immigrants in the years 1924-1926) threatened to undermine another basic assumption of the labor camp — the belief that the new Jewish society in Palestine would be built from the ground up as a classless proletarian society, skipping over the stages of capitalism, class warfare, and revolution. This formula (not to say ideology), labeled “constructive socialism,” claimed that there was an innate identification between the interests of the working class and those of the nation as a whole.¹³ Another view of the future development of the Jewish society in Palestine, held by a negligible minority of communists who did not share the Zionist ideology, was shaped along the Marxist line of class struggle and eventual revolution. Zionists who adopted the concepts of class struggle and eventual revolution essentially were putting off the carrying out of the socialist revolution until the realization of the national goal. They cast the revolution as a future prospect that did not require present action.¹⁴

Quite early, it became clear that the Jewish entity in Palestine would not evolve into a countrywide commune consisting of a network of kibbutzim, and would not be a socialist one, but would rather be built along capitalist principles with the kibbutzim reduced to isolated socialist islands in a capitalist sea. Furthermore, from the very beginning it was obvious that the kibbutz was not intended to include all, or even most, of the Jewish working class in Palestine, nor would that have been feasible.

¹³ David Ben-Gurion published an article along these lines in 1925, under the title “The National Vocation of the Working Class,” *Kuntres* 210 (Mar. 20, 1925). The idea of “constructive socialism” is attributed to Berl Katznelson. See Yosef Gorni, “The Historical Reality of Constructive Socialism,” *Israel Studies* 1, no. 1 (1996): 295-305.

¹⁴ See further discussion below in the section “The Kibbutz Artzi as a Test Case of the Contradiction between Utopia and Marxism.”

The kibbutz proved to be instrumental in achieving Zionism's national goals, and there is a wide consensus that its contribution to the establishment, defense, and development of Israel far exceeded its demographic size. The Kibbutz was at its prime during the national emergency period of the Jewish people, which had begun in the late nineteenth century, intensified in the early 1930s, and reached its peak during the Holocaust in the 1940s. At the beginning of the 1950s, after the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine (Israel), the Jewish people and Zionism were no longer enduring a period of national emergency: the very existence of Israel was no longer in jeopardy; and there were no Jewish communities around the world under acute threat or in immediate need of evacuation.

The Impact of the Establishment of the State of Israel on the Kibbutz

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 confronted the kibbutz with highly complex problems, the most fundamental of which derived from the transition from a voluntary society, in which the kibbutz shouldered many national tasks, to a situation where the state took over many of these responsibilities and actually stripped the kibbutz of much of its national *raison d'être*. From being the most important form of agricultural settlement, the Kibbutz became secondary player. Even more crucial was the fact that it no longer absorbed significant numbers of immigrants, assuming a negligible role in this process. Consequently, its social and ideological prestige declined. To make matters worse, many members, both veterans and newcomers, were abandoning the kibbutzim for the cities.

Ever since the State of Israel was established, the kibbutz's demographic share of Israel's population declined continuously, its influence on the society constantly decreased, and its relevance for facing national and social challenges eroded. The root of all these processes lay in the kibbutz's inability to absorb the mass immigration of the early 1950s and beyond. The main reason was demographic. When the tidal wave of immigration began after the establishment of the state (around 700,000 people came within about three and a half years), all the kibbutzim in the country had a total population of less than 50,000; they simply lacked the capacity to absorb hundreds of thousands of newcomers. Moreover, in the early years of statehood, material conditions on the kibbutzim were inferior to those elsewhere in the country. The daily reality on the kibbutzim was backbreaking

toil and scant physical comfort. In 1954, some 40 percent of their members were still living in temporary structures; only 30 percent lived in apartments with attached sanitary facilities.¹⁵

In addition, the two groups — the immigrants and the veteran kibbutz members — were not a good match for each other. Most immigrants were repelled by the kibbutz way of life, which ran counter to their values and aspirations. Few, if any, had a background that prepared them for communal living, and they were not attracted to farming and rural life. Their primary value was their family; they wanted to nurture close family settings. Most immigrants from Muslim countries were religiously observant, to varying degrees, and were put off by the blatant secularism of the kibbutzim.¹⁶ Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe were deterred by what they perceived as a local version of the Soviet *kolkhoz*, a social format that was too rigid for their taste. After many years of hardship and wandering, what the Holocaust survivors wanted to do, more than anything else, was to rebuild their own homes.

The kibbutzim, for their part, were not falling over themselves to take in people they regarded as foreign and alien. Integrating immigrants into a kibbutz is very different from absorbing them into other forms of settlement and is more like admitting strangers into one's family. In the past, the kibbutzim had absorbed newcomers with prior training and socialization in Europe; there was a strong bond and a sense of solidarity between the kibbutz members and the young adults of their movements in the Diaspora, even before the latter arrived in the country. During the post-Independence era of mass immigration, however, the newcomers were older, arrived with families, and had no preparation for kibbutz life.

In the early years of statehood, there were two main lines of thought in the kibbutz movements, regarding the road to be taken under the new circumstances. One line, shared mainly by the leadership strata, advocated that the kibbutz should adhere to its role as the vanguard, the pioneer marching before the camp and leading the country towards its desirable social goals. But most kibbutz members held that the time had come to develop the kibbutz as a home and raise the members' standard of living. They wanted to build their own homes, not only as part of the society at large. After so many years of serving the national collective, they were less willing to sacrifice themselves in the name of national and social goals, if these came at the cost of their own standard of living. This line was clearly expressed by a

15 See Halamish, *Kibbutz*, 290-307.

16 The religious kibbutz movement was tiny, and many of its settlements were immersed in reconstruction after the havoc wreaked by the 1948 war.

kibbutz member in 1949: “For us, the kibbutz is not just a means to achieve national and socialist goals; the kibbutz is also a goal in its own right, to benefit our people and see them happy.”¹⁷ Put simply, rank-and-file kibbutz members wanted to realize the utopian vision at home and were not interested in instilling them in the outside world, since they felt that they had fulfilled their share in this respect once the Jewish state was established.

The tension between these two lines of thought in the early years of statehood was a contemporary expression of a fundamental dilemma that had been with the kibbutz since its inception — namely, the contrast between conceiving of the kibbutz as a means for realizing national and social goals, on the one hand, and viewing it as a commune, a unique human and social milieu with value in its own right, a way of life whose very existence was a goal to be pursued, on the other.

Even after the kibbutz had lost much of its national role, and even though its prestige was diminishing, its members nevertheless continued to nurture its unique way of life and preserve much of its utopian elements as a commune for another forty years. Then, the economic crisis of the mid-1980s initiated a series of drastic changes toward privatization. The kibbutz became more flexible and took steps to adjust to the changing circumstances, among them the “industrial revolution” it began going through in the early 1960s.

The Impact of the Transformation from Agrarian to Industrial Economy

Originally, the kibbutz marked a step in Jews’ return to nature and to toiling the land, as part of realizing the Zionist vision. For many years, the kibbutz economy was based mainly on agriculture, and being a kibbutznik was conceived of as an act of returning to nature and engaging in agricultural work, though kibbutz members never considered themselves “farmers” in the conventional meaning of the term. The romanticization of agrarian life as more egalitarian and natural, and thus more suitable to running a utopian society, runs deep in European history. In this section, we will explore how the industrialization of the kibbutz improved its economic situation and raised the members’ standard of living, but also how this industrialization impacted, sometimes negatively, the utopianism of these egalitarian communes. From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, the kibbutz enjoyed economic stability and even prosperity, demographic

17 Sala Altman at the Kibbutz Artzi Council, June 1949, quoted in Halamish, *Kibbutz*, 294.

growth, high life expectancy, lower mortality rates among the older generation, and a greater sense of positive well-being. At the same time, the “industrial revolution” within the kibbutzim introduced managerial practices and job hierarchies into kibbutz life, even before a differential wage system was instituted. Thus, industrialization, with all its economic benefits, had a negative impact too.

In the 1990s, the kibbutz, which had always functioned within a capitalist society, introduced capitalist parameters into its domestic system. During the late twentieth century and early-twenty-first century, some of the basic utopian values of the kibbutz way of life were altered. For instance, the primary principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” was replaced with a mechanism guaranteeing a proper relationship between contribution and benefit. That is, differential salaries and the privatization of public budgets were introduced. Another fundamental change was that communal sleeping arrangements for children were gradually given up, with children sleeping overnight at their parents’ homes instead. The 1991 Gulf War, with its Iraqi missile attacks on Israel, gave this process the final push.

For many decades, the kibbutz has demonstrated an impressive ability to overcome crises and a remarkable talent to adapt and evolve, all attesting to its social success. In fact, one of the secrets of its vitality lies in its ability to expand its economic base and move from agriculture into other commercial branches, such as food processing, furniture manufacture, and plastic products, as well as irrigation systems, electronic equipment and high-tech.

The Kibbutz as a Hindrance to the Zionist Left

The success of the kibbutz as a utopian society was never matched by political success, and it did not succeed in spreading its utopian ideas in the Jewish society in pre-state Palestine. The roots of this discrepancy can be traced to the establishment of communal agricultural settlements that distinguished kibbutz members from the emerging Jewish working class in the country, and excluded them from the class struggle and trade-union activity. Thus, from the very beginning, kibbutz members and the urban working class, the two crucial components of the Israeli working class and the natural base for building a political Zionist left, did not share common class interests. After 1948, the kibbutz lost much of its national significance, becoming marginal factor in both the wider social and political spheres. It did

not become a major political force and, in many respects, it turned into an interest group endeavoring to protect its privileges. This critical analysis gives rise to the hypothesis that the kibbutz was not an asset but rather a hindrance in the emergence and development of the Zionist left. This interpretation further supports the contention that the kibbutz was a political failure.

How do we determine what should be considered a success or failure? The basic formula is to evaluate the results in relation to the goals, while taking the costs into account. The results are clear: the kibbutz, as a socialist wing of the Zionist movement, did not manage to constitute a political force strong enough to shape Jewish society in Palestine and the State of Israel, in light of its utopian ideals. In fact, the kibbutz neither intended, nor even tried, to achieve these political goals and made do with realizing its utopian vision at home.

Yet from a more general perspective, and considering the negative impact that the kibbutz's political weakness had on its own fate, the bottom line is indeed that it was a political failure. It was manifested in the 1977 political upheaval in Israel with the takeover of the right wing, a situation that further weakened the kibbutz's political influence, and consequently aggravated its economic condition and contributed to the mid-1980s economic crisis.

The Kibbutz Artzi as a Test Case of the Contradiction between Utopia and Marxism

Though the kibbutz is considered the ultimate example of utopian socialism, employing Marxist analytical tools in the study of the kibbutz reveals an inherent contradiction between its utopian characteristics and Marxist socialism. Marx viewed small agrarian communities as petite-bourgeois forms of utopian socialism because, in his view, they diverted revolutionary energy from the political and trade-union struggle that must be conducted in a country's centers of political power and industry; he saw them as "castles in the air."¹⁸ In fact, the utopian features of the kibbutz, its existence as a rural community, based on agriculture, and its place in a national liberation movement containing elements of romanticism, made it a non-Marxist, and even anti-Marxist, socialist enterprise. Nonetheless, two of the kibbutz movements incorporated Marxism into their ideology; and one of them even embraced revolutionary Marxism.

18 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," Marx, Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London, 1976), 516, quoted in Yiftah Goldman, *Kibbutz*, https://ygoldman.org/?p=133#_edn4.

What follows is a short exercise in looking at this particular kibbutz movement, the Kibbutz Artzi, as a case study of (a) the political failure of the kibbutz as a utopia; (b) the inherent contradiction between utopia and revolutionary Marxism; (c) the contradiction between the kibbutz's constructive mission, of building a socialist society from the start, and the class struggle and revolutionary vision of Marxism.

The Kibbutz Artzi was a total social framework, even more so than the other kibbutz movements, since, in addition to encompassing social, economic, and cultural dimensions, it was the only kibbutz movement that established a political party of its own, a party which all kibbutz members had to join. According to its platform (1927), Kibbutz Artzi would consist of pioneer cells of the new society, as a constructive tool of the Jewish working class, and a mainstay of the class war. The Kibbutz Artzi considered its settlements a model or prototype for the future society — cells that would spread those ideals all over the country and eventually build a new society based on the kibbutz's utopian principles.

But this was all on the declarative level and contained an a priori contradiction between the introversion and individualism of the kibbutz members and the revolutionary temperament. It soon became evident that the Marxist theory of class struggle and an eventual proletariat revolution did not conform to the humanistic mentality and the type of education the members of that kibbutz movement had acquired through their youth movement, Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir (The Young Guard). The attempt at combining utopian ideas and revolutionary Marxism not only created an inherent ideological contradiction and proved to be futile but also inflicted social conflicts and crises in some of the kibbutzim of that movement, leading to the expulsion of members who were too devoted to revolutionary Marxism. In the long run, Kibbutz Artzi went through the same changes experienced by the other kibbutz movements.

A Cautious Look at the Crystal Ball

In spite of all the changes kibbutz went through around the turn of the century, in 2018, it still forms a dynamic living community that is economically self-sustaining and even prosperous. After years of negative demographic growth, the waiting lists for joining kibbutzim far exceed available housing facilities.

About three dozen kibbutzim are still intentionally “traditional” in their social structure and preserve many principles of equality and collectivism. These kibbutzim have been organized into an association called the “communal stream.” It is interesting to note that the highest degree of utopianism is retained in the most affluent kibbutzim, and that most of the communal kibbutzim are relatively well-off economically. It conforms to the unwritten rule that utopian ideas, primarily full equality, are easier to achieve at times of scarcity (when all have very little) or prosperity (when it is possible to satisfy all). The most difficult test of a utopian commune comes when the economic situation forces members to make decisions about priorities.

Recent years have also witnessed the rise of new types of kibbutzim that are located in cities and towns. One of the new types of kibbutz is that of “the Educators Movement,” an ideological movement composed of young individuals who live (mostly) in city communes. They are firmly committed to traditional kibbutz ideology and see their mission as being educators in Israel and a task force for changing society by means of educational and political activity. They insist on preserving their own frameworks and refuse to join existing kibbutzim, but they lack the means for stable economic survival on their own. The existence side-by-side of communes motivated by ideology and committed to social and even political activity in Israeli society, but which lack a stable economic base; and of economically-established kibbutzim devoid of clear ideological commitment and refraining from party-oriented political activity, is yet another illustration of the main contention of this essay.

Most contemporary kibbutzim do not live up to the ideals of the traditional kibbutz, but even those that have undergone various degrees of privatization preserve a high level of social solidarity and maintain elaborated systems of mutual responsibility in matters of health, education, and welfare. They have also introduced what is termed a “safety net” for securing a decent standard of living for the less affluent members. The privatized kibbutzim might even be regarded as living utopias when compared to the surrounding society. It is an open question whether those who choose to join a kibbutz, or to stay there, really wish to realize utopian ideas or are pushed by the harsh and competitive reality in Israel and are attracted by the suburban lifestyle: a small house with a piece of land and a garden, a wonderful place to raise children, etc. Still, one cannot ignore that the wish for communal life with a certain degree of social solidarity and mutual responsibility likely still plays a role.

The state of the kibbutz today proves the contention that, all along, it has evolved and developed more due to circumstances than ideology, with the proportion between the two perpetually changing. The kibbutz movement is still involved in social activity beyond the fences of its settlements out of the conviction that such work is part of its national *raison d'être*. The source for these kinds of activity is more related to human and national solidarity than to political orientation and motivation.

Conclusions

Some of the utopian aspirations of the kibbutz seem to be incompatible with human nature, and even to transcend the limitations of human nature, almost verging on pretension or hubris. Among these, those that stand out the most are the communal education and the abolition of private property. The constraints that some utopian principles of the kibbutz put on its members were bearable during the national emergency period and continued to exist on account of inertia and the organizational power of the leadership for about forty more years, until dissatisfaction accumulated and changes continued, which combined with the economic crisis of the mid-1980s shattered all spheres of kibbutz life. It became evident that what might work under emergency circumstances failed to hold up in a “normal” situation.

The kibbutz, which was basically the product of circumstance, managed to exist as utopian society by being part of a national liberation movement — Zionism. It maintained its utopian character as long as it was a mission-oriented society; and even today, to some extent, it is motivated by a conviction that it does have a social and human mission to accomplish. On the other hand, even when the utopian principles of the kibbutz were strictly implemented in the social sphere, and in the kibbutz itself, the kibbutz did not become a crucial political factor, and to the extent that it contributed to society at large, it was mainly in the national sphere and not the social one.

When the kibbutz celebrated its centennial, a volume of articles was published under the title *The Kibbutz — The First Hundred Years*, implicitly emphasizing the word “first.”¹⁹ Offering a multi-dimensional observation of the past and the present of the kibbutz, the articles present it as a vibrant and vital society, constantly seeking to maintain a communal way of life in ever changing circumstances. Nowadays, there is a wide spectrum of kibbutz types, adjusted by way of trial

¹⁹ Aviva Haramish and Zvi Zameret, eds., *Ha-Kibbutz: Me'a ha-Shanim ha-Rishonot* [The Kibbutz: The First Hundred Years] (Jerusalem, 2010).

and error to the complex reality of the twenty-first century. The common denominator of these is mutual responsibility and a sense of social and fraternal solidarity among the members. The spirit of that volume of articles reinforces the conclusions of the discussion above, that reports of the kibbutz's death are greatly exaggerated and extremely premature.

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