

## THE KIBBUTZ

The Israeli kibbutz is a form of collective settlement that offers an alternative to the traditional family. The kibbutz drew its inspiration from the 19th century European socialist movements. At that time Eastern European Jews (*Ashkenazim*) were suffering from social, political, and economic oppression. Zionism, a secular political movement, and a Jewish scouting movement loosely based on German *Wandervogel groups* became an outlet for the frustrations of the Jewish youth. Part of the creed adopted by the Jewish/Zionist youth movement stressed "revolt against tradition, love of nature, love of nation...self expression, emphasis on the emotional aspect of life and the joy of work." The impact of growing Jewish nationalism combined with the influence of the youth movement proved enough to lure the first immigrants to Palestine.

The early Ashkenazi immigrants established themselves in small collective settlements known as *kvutzot* that were designed to provide food and shelter for above twelve settlers. The first kvutzah, Degania, was established beside the Sea of Galilee on land purchased from Palestinian landowners by the Jewish National Fund. A.D. Gordon, a Russian-born Jew, and a small group of volunteers made up mostly of Eastern European urban intellectuals founded the settlement in 1909. The volunteers rejected the ideals of their parents' society and regarded themselves as the founders of a new society that stressed the equality of men and women.

While Degania was established to be a model farm, at Ein Charod a kvutzah was organized as the base for the first Jewish labor battalion, a disciplined organization of committed Zionist volunteers who worked at manual labor wherever they were needed throughout Palestine. The labor battalion was such a successful experiment that in a single year it attracted 560 immigrants. With such a rapid increase in population, operation of the camp became unwieldy. A dispute arose among the members as to whether Ein Charod should become a collective farm like Degania or split into several labor battalions. Small kvutzot could no longer absorb the hundreds of homeless Jewish immigrants who were coming to Palestine; a new kind of collective was needed. By 1920 Ein Charod had answered that need by evolving into a large collective settlement (300 people) with an elected central governing group. The first kibbutz had been established.

Today, only 3-4% (approximately 102,000) of the Israeli population live on kibbutzim. Although originally kibbutzim were agricultural collectives, today many have diversified. They are now involved in many kinds of economic activities such as meat slaughtering and packing, dairy farming, tourism, publishing, education, and manufacturing.

The kibbutz operates as a self-sustaining unit and as a single extended household. Over the years the guiding principles have remained the same: communal ownership of all property, social and economic equality, democratic governance, and the welfare of the group before the desires of the individual. Life on the kibbutz is organized around the group; meals are eaten together and the dining hall serves as a community recreation center and meeting place. In exchange for their labor, members receive food, housing medical care and education. The governing group assumes complete responsibility for managing the kibbutz and makes decisions that would be left to the individual family in other societies.

Family life takes different forms depending on the ideological base of the particular kibbutz. In the past, Jewish Orthodox kibbutzim held a very strict traditional view of

marriage, forbidding partners to live together before marriage. In other kibbutzim, couples that decided to live together simply moved to larger living quarters. Today, more kibbutz members have returned to the traditional view of marriage and tend to marry younger and have more children than the national average. Couples do not have total responsibility for raising their children. When a child is born, mother and child spend a few days together in the hospital and then the child is taken to the Infant House by a nurse. The parents visit as often as they can, but the children do not live with their parents. At age two, children move to the Toddlers' House, where they join other children their age. They remain with this same peer group through high school, eating, sleeping, playing, and going to school together. Their caretakers discipline children, while the role of the parent in the child's life is one of friendship and affection.

During adolescence boys and girls spend part of the day in public high school and part of the day on the kibbutz, working at tasks under adult supervision. Once or twice a week there are youth group meetings, which are something like scouting programs, although emphasis is placed on pre-military training. Throughout adolescence, there is a great deal of freedom, and discipline is the responsibility of the peer group.

At the time of high school graduation these young adults are ready to join the kibbutz; however, most go directly to the military to serve their mandatory two years before taking on full kibbutz responsibilities.

### **Social Change**

In the earliest kibbutzim about 35% of the members were women. Early records indicate that job assignments were shared equally between women and men. Today 50% of the members are women and there are many children. A common complaint of the women concerns the division of labor. Most women are assigned cooking and housekeeping jobs in the kitchen, laundry, children's houses, and schools. Men are rarely assigned these jobs and work more often in agriculture, industry, or in the administration of kibbutz business. Of the families who leave the kibbutz to live in towns, more than half do so because the woman is dissatisfied. For many of these former kibbutzniks, the *moshav* is the preferred way of life. Moshav members own their own homes and raise their children at home, but work and own farm land collectively.

Those who remain on the kibbutz concede that the founders of the kibbutz movement would hardly recognize the kibbutz of today. The original, idealistic settlers were dedicated to an austere life of hard physical labor. Today the influence of socialism is weakening in Israel and material possessions and social status are considered important. Since most kibbutzim have experienced extraordinary economic success, their members are able to live quite comfortably. Beauty parlors, theatres, orchestras, choir groups, and sports teams may all be found on a modern kibbutz.

Many established kibbutzim have become complex organizations that can no longer be run by rotating governing groups. Members have come to see the need to be educated in business and management in order to improve production and efficiency. Younger members are sent to school to become doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, or nutritionists, with the understanding that they will return to the kibbutz to practice their profession. No longer are all jobs done by everyone, and the result is a small, stratified society. Material comforts and

specialized jobs have brought with them the individualism that early kibbutzniks tried to avoid. Moshe Shamir, an Israeli novelist in the late 1960s, wrote of this trend, "Behind the fence of material prosperity we face spiritual catastrophe." It is a point widely discussed on kibbutzim today.

*"Although the anti-family feeling of the revolutionary phase (of the Kibbutz) has abated, it has not disappeared altogether . . . Kibbutzim still try to control and limit the family and direct it toward the attainment of collective goals. The main problem of the kibbutzim from a dynamic point of view is how to allow the family more privacy and a certain internal autonomy without harming the cohesion of the community.*

*Family and Community in the Kibbutz* Yonina Talmon, Israeli Sociologist

Still, the kibbutz has been a model for economic collectives in Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Singapore, Venezuela, Denmark and thirteen African countries. Each of the more than 200 kibbutzim in Israel has its own political and ideological direction and is affiliated with the Labor Party, Mapam (a secular Marxist party), or one of the orthodox religious parties. Kibbutzim represent strong voting blocks in the political parties with which they are affiliated.

Despite the fact that they represent only a small percentage of the population, kibbutz members wield enormous power and influence in Israeli political life. They are found in the Knesset (Israeli parliament), the Prime Minister's cabinet, and the upper echelons of the Histadrut (organization of labor unions); and they make up an extremely high proportion of the officers corps of the Israel Defense Forces. Regardless of the changes and problems encountered on today's kibbutz, new kibbutzim continue to be established, and, for most Israelis, remain a cherished cultural ideal.

Ann Grabhorn

### Bibliography

Bettelheim, Bruno: *Children of the Dream*, Macmillan, 1969.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs: *Facts About Israel*, 1979.

Gross, Susan and Marjorie Bingham: *Women in Israel*, Gary McCuen Publications, 1980.

Sachar, Howard: *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, Knopf, 1979.

Spiro, Melford: *Venture in Utopia*, Schocken, 1963.

Talmon, Yonina: *Family and Community in the Kibbutz*, Harvard University Press, 1972.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Define a kibbutz.
2. Is a kibbutz like a family? What are the **similarities**? The **differences**?
3. What are women's roles in the kibbutz? Men's roles? Children's roles? How have they changed in recent years?