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# **The Kibbutz at One Hundred**

Aviva Halamish

Department of History

The Open University of Israel

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The Kibbutz is one of the most impressive accomplishments of Zionism, widely recognized as an extraordinary human, social and economic achievement. The imprint of the Kibbutz has been recognized and appreciated both in Israel and around the world. The word "Kibbutz" is itself one of the best-known Hebrew words in universal discourse, and can be found in many dictionaries in other languages.

Degania, the "Mother of the Collective Settlements" (*"Em ha-Kvutzot"*), was established in 1910 by a handful of young men and women; one hundred years later there are about 270 Kibbutzim all over the country with about 120,000 Kibbutz members and their children, comprising less than 2% of Israel's population (compared to 7% in 1948). Figures and statistics aside, the impact of the Kibbutz on Jewish society in Mandatory Palestine until 1948 and on the State of Israel since then has always far exceeded its numerical size in both absolute and relative terms.

While there is a consensus that from the very beginning the Kibbutz combined Zionism and Socialism with a clear and unequivocal primacy to Zionism, the history of the Kibbutz and the vast research that deals with it have been marked by two inherent tensions. The first concerns the origin of the Kibbutz and its development: whether to view these as products of ideological conceptions or as the result of historical circumstances, i.e., a reaction to the difficulties and necessities of time and place. The second tension relates to evaluating the Kibbutz: viewing it as a communal way of life with its own merits, whose very existence is a goal; as opposed to looking at the Kibbutz as a means for achieving national and social aims.

Like other communes, the Kibbutz is a group of people who wish to live in a society based on equality and cooperation, but beyond this is a Zionist aim that stands above the economic success and the quality of life of its members, which is a feature unique to the Israeli Kibbutz. Thus, any comparison with other communes makes clear this unique aspect; it is part of the national project, shares the nation's objectives, and takes an active part in their achievement.

From the very beginning, the Kibbutz had aspirations, verging on pretensions, to change human nature for the better, to create "a new Hebrew man". For that purpose,

the Kibbutz founders and their successors constructed a unique way of life, a total one, which encompassed all spheres of human life – economic, social and cultural, and which introduced unprecedented educational methods. Some of these proved to be incompatible with human nature, such as total, absolute equality among all members of the Kibbutz; abolition of private property; and communal child rearing which involved the separation of children and parents for most hours of the day and in many cases, in the early years, for weeks at a time.

As time went on, various aspects of the Kibbutz way of life underwent changes and some of its basic values were altered. For instance, the primary principle of the Kibbutz "from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs" was modified to a search for the proper relationship between contribution and benefit, through introduction of a differential wage.

Becoming a Kibbutznik was for many years understood as an act of returning to nature and engaging in agricultural work, though the Kibbutzniks never considered themselves "farmers", but rather "agricultural workers". Kibbutz life was based on the principle of self-sufficiency, seeking to create a new type of society where all would be equal, free from exploitation and avoiding the exploitation of others.

These idealistic principles did not always match the requirements of Zionism and the State of Israel. After a period of trial and error, the Kibbutz became more flexible and adjusted itself to the changing circumstances. One of the secrets of its vitality lies in its talent for expanding its economic base from agriculture into other activities such as industry (including high-tech), tourism, and services.

Living on a Kibbutz has been a chapter in the lives of many, both Israelis and foreigners, and it is difficult to ascertain how many people have spent either a short or an extended period of time on a Kibbutz. Among these are, first of all, Kibbutz members, for whom the Kibbutz is their permanent home. Then there are those born on the Kibbutz, some of whom decided to remain as members while others left. Then there are the many members of the pioneering youth movements who spent their summers working on a Kibbutz, and the graduates of those movements, in Israel and

abroad, who stayed on the Kibbutz during their military service in the Nahal branch of the army, some of whom later joined as members.

There are the immigrants who spent their first months in Israel in a Kibbutz Ulpan, a framework combining an intensive course of Hebrew with working on the Kibbutz. There are also children and youth who came to Israel on Youth Aliyah without their parents and were absorbed on the Kibbutz, as well as children and youth from the geographical and social periphery of Israel who were educated on Kibbutzim.

Even those who stayed on a Kibbutz for only a limited time found their experience there had a long lasting and crucial impact on their lives. There are also thousands of volunteers, who came from all corners of the world to work on the Kibbutz and taste this special way of life; some continued to cherish their memories of that experience for many years and became ambassadors of good will for Israel.

While countless numbers of people have benefited from the Kibbutz in one way or another, others begrudge the time they spent there and carry negative memories, either because they resented being raised in the common children's homes and not with their parents, or because of the group pressure and lack of private space. And there are those for whom the Kibbutz is the "Other"; a group of people living behind a fence, an entity that lies in geographical proximity but is very far away in terms of social and cultural values. This applies mainly to immigrants from Muslim societies, particularly in North Africa, many of whom ended up living in the underprivileged development towns on Israel's periphery.

After the establishment of the State in 1948, the Kibbutz went through a crisis caused by the transition from a voluntary society, where it shouldered many national tasks, to a situation in which the State took over many of these tasks, and actually stripped the Kibbutz of a major part of its *raison d'être*. Yet during the 1950's and even the early 1960's, up to 20 percent of the members of the Knesset came from the Kibbutz movement. Valuable contributions of the Kibbutz to nation building were in the spheres of economics and of security and military matters, but above all in the dispersion of the rapidly growing population and in cultivating peripheral areas. It made an unparalleled contribution to the Zionist enterprise by absorbing youth and new immigrants, in settlement, and in defense matters. Since the early days of the

state, Kibbutz members have volunteered for the elite military units, especially as pilots, at rates several times higher than their proportion in the general population, and even during the second Lebanon war in 2006 the proportion of deaths among the Kibbutz soldiers was seven times higher than their distribution in the general public. The nation at large benefitted from the ability of the Kibbutz to supply emissaries and activists to perform national tasks without impairing their families' economic situation.

The decade of economic decline and hyperinflation in the 1980's hit the Kibbutz severely. In the last two decades, the Kibbutz has undergone a major transformation in an effort to adapt to the changes in the world around it, especially by adopting various degrees of privatization and by finding new answers to issues arising within the institution itself. However, today there are still dozens of Kibbutzim which preserve a large measure of equality and collectivism, while at the same time there are new types of Kibbutzim that have been established in cities and towns. They include groups of young people who volunteer to live a shared communal life and work on social issues, many involving informal education projects in development areas.

Overall, the Kibbutz went through many changes in the past hundred years – in its way of life, its social status, and in the nature of its impact on Israeli society as a whole. In the past, when the Labor movement was the hegemonic power in Israel from the 1930's to to the late 1970's, the Kibbutz was at the top of the Israeli ethos. Since the decline of Labor from that position, and now as well, there is a general consensus regarding the Kibbutz's indispensable contribution to the development of the Jewish community in pre-State Palestine, and to the founding of the State. However, there has also been a long-running dispute over the question of what privileges, if any, the Kibbutz is entitled to, based on its historical role. This debate is exacerbated by the fact that the special and unique role of the Kibbutz in society has seemingly ended, and that it has lost many of its unique features as a communal way of life.

The Kibbutz at one hundred is very different from its early days and from its image in the Israeli collective memory. There are both bright and dark spots, probably in different proportions, in the past as well as in the present. In any case, it seems that

reports of the death of the Kibbutz are greatly exaggerated and extremely premature. It is still a dynamic way of life, and those who adhere to it still seek new ways to realize what was once termed a utopia.

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Aviva Halamish

Department of History

The Open University of Israel

[avivaha@openu.ac.il](mailto:avivaha@openu.ac.il)

### **About the Author:**

Professor Aviva Halamish is head of Modern History Studies at the Open University of Israel. Her research focuses on the history of the Jewish people and of Palestine in the twentieth century, with emphasis on immigration and on Arab-Jewish relations.

Her most recent book is *Meir Yaari: A Collective Biography, The First Fifty Years, 1897–1947* (2009, Hebrew). Halamish is president of the Association for Israel Studies.

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