

In Israel, Kibbutz Life Undergoes Reinvention

by LOURDES GARCIA-NAVARRO



Enlarge

Gil Cohen Magen/Reuters

Israeli children walk through Kibbutz Kramim in the Negev desert in 2008. The traditional communal farm has struggled in recent years with less than 5 percent of the population living in kibbutzim.

walk in holding dishes of food for the potluck meal. It looks like a gathering of any group of young Israelis, but the people here are members of an urban kibbutz.

"It's the renewal of the kibbutz movement. And I think it takes the basic and core values and principles of the kibbutz movement but places it in a different context," says Michal Gomel, a 28-year-old social worker.

She grew up on a traditional kibbutz — one that was set in a remote rural environment, where all the funds and the work were shared.



Enlarge

Pier Paolo Cito/AP

Bryan Meadan walks down the stairs of the urban Kibbutz Tamuz in Beit Shemesh, outside Jerusalem, one of dozens of urban kibbutzim in the country.

together. We also have a lot of ideological sharing, which means we learn a lot from each other."

And they want to achieve certain common goals. This group is active in local politics. At the moment, they are leading the charge in trying to maintain the secular character of their neighborhood as increasing numbers of Orthodox Jews move in.

Communal meals are an important feature of their life, when they can discuss and plan activities. As dusk falls, they sit down to eat.

The Kibbutz In Progress

There are 256 kibbutzim in Israel, according to the movement's official [Web site](#). But for the past decade, the movement has been in crisis.

October 13, 2009

text size **A A A**

For years now, the kibbutz movement in Israel has been struggling. These communal farms were a big part of the utopian dream that married Zionism with socialism. But now, fewer than 5 percent of Israelis live in kibbutzim.

Many communities were privatized; others were abandoned. But from the ashes, some Israelis are trying to branch out and take the old movement in a new direction.

The Urban Kibbutz

It's dinnertime at an apartment in Jerusalem's Kiryat Yovel neighborhood. The door is unlocked and 20-something men and women

"What we felt [was] that in modern society today there is a lot of alienation between people in the cities, where most of the population today lives," Gomel says. "So this is why we felt we want to live in a more urban setting but with the solidarity and the friendship and the personal ties of a small kibbutz."

Her urban kibbutz — one of dozens in the country — is made up of 13 adults and three children. Most of them live in this apartment building.

"We want to share a space, that's for sure. We don't share the same apartment. We're not in a commune setting," Gomel says. "We have some kind of economic sharing. We celebrate holidays

"We are in a situation of restarting the whole thing," says Muki Tzur, a historian and former secretary-general of the United Kibbutz Movement. Sitting in a park in Tel Aviv, he says he is hopeful that the movement can survive this difficult time.

"It's a pregnant movement. There are many directions, many adaptations; there are many new ideas that are coming through, and many old dreams that couldn't be accomplished in the past can be accomplished today," Tzur says. "The kibbutz is in the hospital, but to go to the hospital doesn't mean that you are sick. Sometimes you go to the hospital because something is going to be born."

But what exactly? Sometimes even those who are starting a new kibbutz don't know.

In the kibbutz of Hanaton in northern Israel, Jacob Ner-David fields a question about what the new model for this kibbutz will be.

"The 25 or 30 new houses that you want to build for future members, what will it mean to those families to be a kibbutz member?" the questioner asks.

"It's still going through definition," Ner-David answers. "There isn't an absolute answer to you."

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- Muki Tzur

Ner-David moved here a few months ago from Jerusalem with his wife and six children, along with 18 other families.

People in the area are busy at work remodeling homes they will eventually be living in. Hanaton, Ner-David says, was founded in the 1980s, but by 2006, only 11 of the original 114 members were left. Like many kibbutzim, its finances faltered and it was deeply in debt.

Ner-David and the other families bought the kibbutz and are now working out how the community will function. Everyone will own his own home. Most have jobs off the kibbutz, so their income will be their own as well.

Beyond that, Hanaton is affiliated with the Conservative Jewish movement, and Ner-David says that the families who come here all want to explore their faith.

"Your Jewish identity has to mean something, and it has to be the basis for how you view communal life," he says. "Because it is a bunch of people that want to figure out what does it all mean."

He says Hanaton will be a place where some interfaith challenges can be resolved.

"Hopefully, it will be an example of what could be, how do you all get along. I mean, if we have one synagogue, for example, what do you do? I'm sure there's going to be a breakaway synagogue," he says, laughing.

It hasn't been easy, but Ner-David says he doesn't regret coming here. "The reaction we've got from most people that we speak to, for example, in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, my business partner — who's an absolute Tel Avivian — is 'Wow, you are actually doing what everybody else dreams about.'"

The Special-Needs Kibbutz

About an hour away is a different community that is trying to completely redefine what a kibbutz is.

"Kishorit is a home for life for adults with special needs located in the Galilee and has 140 members. The vision of the founders was based on the kibbutz model," says Dita Kohl-Roman, one of the directors.

Yochanan Bayit, a resident with special needs, came to Kishorit five years ago and works in the community's television station.

"I came here to change my life. I have interesting things to do," he says.

Kohl-Roman says the kibbutz members here all have different backgrounds — some are autistic, some are schizophrenic, all have some form of disability. Eventually, there will be a community for family members abutting Kishorit. A sister area for Arab members with special needs is also planned.

"The kibbutz has an enormous ability to heal. The community life in the kibbutz, the fact that one celebrates the holidays together, actually is very good for people with special needs," Kohl-Roman says.

Having a place where no one judges you, where there is a safety network, she says, is vital. "You have people who are taking care of you here, and you have friends here. You can help others who are weaker than you and you can get help of other members who are stronger than you," she says.

As in a traditional kibbutz, everyone is expected to work. There are a toy factory, a goat farm and a kennel. Kohl-Roman says there is nothing like Kishorit anywhere in the world.

She says she is excited by what's happening here. Far from the kibbutz movement being dead and buried, she says, it is being reborn.

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comments

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Recent First



Jehudah Ben-Israel (JehudahBenIsrael) wrote:

Lisa Scheer, a bit belated response but let me welcome you home, to Israel. People of all ages are welcome to our homeland and to whatever way of life in it. I wish to suggest two practical points: 1) Contact Nefesh B'Nefesh which will assist you in making the move, financially and otherwise. 2) Request to contact Hatnuah Hakibutzit (The Kibbutz Movement) organization which will enable you to gain additional information about settling in a kibbutz.

I wish to make the following statement: As everything in life, the kibbutz movement is a dynamic phenomenon. The kibbutz of which my parents were members in the early 1930s was much different than the kibbutz of the 1950s and 1960s. The kibbutz of which I was a member in the 1960s and 1970s is different than today's kibbutz where I reside, this time as a non-member, who benefits from much that the kibbutz offers; and in order to reside as non-member generally age is not an issue, at least where I live with my family.

We look forward to seeing you amongst us, at home, in Israel!!!

October 16, 2009 2:15:30 AM EDT

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Bob Dixon (Spotty) wrote:

John James,

In addition to being amazingly smug and self-important, your self-reported profile contains this gem concerning your "hobby" of

"whacking zionists and US conservatives so bad they will never forget till the day they die thus doing their country and the world a favor."

1) Do you really think "zionists" and "US conservatives" are doing the world a favor when they die?

- 2) How far would you go to "do the world a favor?"
3) How are you different from those you hate?

October 15, 2009 7:26:55 PM EDT

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Grace Sheffield (EndTheOccupationNow) wrote:

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October 15, 2009 6:52:48 PM EDT

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Grace Sheffield (EndTheOccupationNow) wrote:

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October 14, 2009 12:24:27 AM EDT

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joseph galison (rudeboy) wrote:

Here is some news. Folks if you want to really find out what is going on visit Haaretz. They are far more honest in their reporting. Do you think NPR or the NYT's would put this story out?????

Last update - 18:07 01/10/2009

Poll: 56% of American Jews think U.S. should strike Iran

By Natasha Mozgovaya, Haaretz Correspondent

Tags: Jewish World, Iran, Nuclear

October 13, 2009 11:24:26 PM EDT

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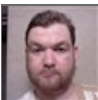
Adi Halili (adihalili) wrote:

As a former kibbutznik who's parents and other siblings still live in one of the original kibbutzim I like to note that the reporter failed to acknowledge that there are several kibbutzim who maintained the original kibbutz format and are thriving both economically and culturally.

October 13, 2009 8:41:35 PM EDT

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Philip Henry Christian (Kamyl) wrote:

My sentiments exactly, John. The whole time I was listening to this story on my home from work, I could not stop thinking how utterly selfish they are to even broadcast this when the Palestinians have been suffering at the hands of these Zionist who can not govern themselves in any effective manner except through destruction and terror. Mostly Palestinians are very patient people who have faith that Allah(swa) will eventually punish those oppressing them. But I think the truth should be reported from National Public Radio. Not this 'feel good' type of journalism.

October 13, 2009 8:40:09 PM EDT

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HOWELL CLARK (HOWIE1) wrote:

how much more proof does one need to understand that socialism just does not work in the long run. in a small stable not to diverse group one would think it stood its best chance of survival but here is totally honest truth that it is not succeeding and by folks who so deperately want it to succeed. lets just hope they only ever succeed at the local level first before they try to force it nationally as israel will then surely fail.

October 13, 2009 6:14:25 PM EDT

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Robert A. Letcher (bobl1234) wrote:

Way to go, NPR! Only moments has passed after several readers critiqued your coverage of the FIRST WOMAN to win the nobel prize in economics--your report's dearth of substance effectively patronized her, the very thing that, i imagine, he saw his reporting her winning the prize as contributing to the end of. Then, you deftly demonstrated your capacity for learning by all but joining in the celebration of "socialist" kibbutz and their "socialist ideology", thereby clarifying, i suppose, how Americans who support national health insurance could expect to

hear those terms sneered at them, while Israelis could expect to live at the top of the US foreign aid budget--despite being so misguided.

October 13, 2009 5:53:31 PM EDT

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Michael Hessler (Michael__Hessler) wrote:

Lisa Scheer (CosmosHuman), please do "make aliyah tomorrow!" We made aliyah last July to Ma'aleh Adumim and then move to Ra'anana this July. I am very thankful to be both living and working in Israel at age 53. Check out my wife's blog on making aliyah,

<http://aliyahhandbook.com/blog/index.php/intro/introduction>

October 13, 2009 5:07:11 PM EDT

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