

# **Kibbutz**

## **What, Why, When, Where**

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by Jon Fidler, journalist, member of Kibbutz Beit Ha'emek

### **Snapshot**

It is almost a century since a small group of young Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, inspired by Zionist and socialist ideals, set up the first *kvutza* ("group" in Hebrew, renamed *kibbutz*, "community" when membership grew) on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

They viewed the kvutza as a closely-knit, egalitarian community, based on common ownership of the means of production and consumption, where all, conferring together, made decisions by majority vote and bore responsibility for all.

Despite economic setbacks and a waning ideology, the kibbutz movement has since become the world's largest communitarian movement.

Some 117,300 people live in 268 kibbutzim across Israel, from the Golan Heights in the north to the Red Sea in the south. Membership ranges from less than 100, in a few cases, to more than 1000 in a number of kibbutzim, most having several hundred members. About 80% of the kibbutzim were founded before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Although each kibbutz is socially and economically an autonomous unit, a number of national federations provide coordination of activities as well as some services. At the beginning of the new millennium, the two largest national federations, the United Kibbutz Movement and the Kibbutz Artzi Movement amalgamated and became The Kibbutzim Movement, to which over 90% of the kibbutzim belong. Some 6% of kibbutzim are affiliated with the *Kibbutz Dati* (religious kibbutz) and there are two national-ultra-orthodox kibbutzim, which belong to *Poalei Agudat Yisrael*.

Most kibbutzim are similarly laid out, with communal facilities such as dining hall, auditorium, offices and library at the center, ringed by members' homes and gardens, with sports and educational facilities beyond these, and industrial buildings and agricultural land on the perimeter.

#### **By definition... a kibbutz (or kvutza) is:**

"... a voluntary collective community, mainly agricultural, in which there is no private wealth and which is responsible for all the needs of its members and their families."  
(*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1969)

"... an organization for settlement which maintains a collective society of members organized on the basis of general ownership of possessions. Its aims are self-labor, equality and cooperation in all areas of production, consumption and education."  
(*Legal definition in the Cooperative Societies Register*)

## **The Beginning**

In 1909 a group of young pioneers, who drained swamps near Hadera and lived as a collective community, decided to establish an independent farm owned by its worker-members at Deganya, forming the first 'kvutza'. Other groups followed suit and by World War II there were over 30 such communities in Palestine.

These "founding fathers" had immigrated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mainly from Russia and were imbued with the ideals of socialism and the spirit of the period which led to the Russian Revolution. They also believed in a Zionism based on the return to the Land of Israel and the tilling of its earth. They believed that this would lead to the creation of a new Jewish identity; it also expressed their political goal of establishing Jewish settlements in Palestine.

These first settlements regarded themselves as enlarged families and kept membership small. In 1913/14, for example, Deganya had only 28 members. They were poor, life was harsh and work centered on agriculture, which required draining swamps, removing rocks from hills and transforming parts of the desert into fertile farmland. They also had to cope with extreme heat, malaria and food-related illnesses.

Social life revolved around the dining room, where people would meet, eat and talk. Decisions were made by direct democracy. In discussions, which often continued late into the night, members would decide how to allocate the following day's work, guard duties, kitchen chores and other tasks, as well as debate problems and make decisions.

## **Growing up**

During the '20s and '30s, the settlements' society of singles changed to one in which families were formed, leading to the establishment of schools and children's houses. Small industries began to appear, mainly as extensions of agriculture, and these soon became profitable enterprises. The kibbutzim emerged, aiming to become large, self-sufficient communities, combining agriculture with industry.

The '30s also witnessed the beginnings of a religious kibbutz movement, which - in contrast to its secular predecessors - saw the ideals of the movement, including equality, mutual help and building the Land, as a realization of the Jewish way of life.

By 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, the kibbutzim had not only succeeded in creating a unique society, they had also been instrumental in many aspects of the struggle towards the creation of the State and in its early development: they had assumed key functions in settlement of outlying areas and along the country's future borders, immigrant absorption, defense and agricultural development. Once these functions were taken over by the government, the interaction between the kibbutzim and society at large diminished; it has never stopped completely, but is marginal today.

The first decades after the establishment of the State, despite some ups and downs, showed accelerated growth of the kibbutzim, both demographic and economic. Third

and fourth generation kibbutzniks were born, creating large family groupings. Living standards increased - in fact, in the 1960s they rose more rapidly than in the country as a whole. Over a period of some 75 years the kibbutz population grew continuously; since 1990, however, it has been slowly declining and the average age has been increasing. The process has been accelerated by the growing tendency of youngsters to leave.

(Yad Tabenkin, *Facts and Figures*, 2001)

## **The Crisis of the Eighties and Nineties**

In the 1980s, triple-digit inflation and exorbitant interest rates caused near economic ruin for many kibbutz factories (along with their non-kibbutz counterparts) and for the communities they supported. Kibbutz debts with banks rose dramatically as inflation rocketed, peaking (at 450%) in 1984. This macro-instability caused great problems for the kibbutzim as they had borrowed heavily to develop industry and to change their internal structure. By 1985, one-third of the kibbutzim were in financial difficulties.

The government, banks and kibbutz federations hammered out two major agreements for canceling and restructuring kibbutz debts. The price was heavy: some kibbutzim had to sell agricultural land to pay off debts; others had to slash operating costs, find new sources of income and raise productivity. Often this required cutbacks in spending on basics like food, non-essential medical care, education and travel, as well as abandoning certain long-held ideological beliefs, particularly in the realm of equality.

Global and national factors also influenced kibbutz thinking: ideologically, the collapse of the USSR played a part; members spent more time traveling abroad and were exposed to new technologies of global communication; cable or satellite TV found its way into many kibbutz homes; and the use of computers and the internet, at work and at home, spread rapidly.

The result of all these factors was an unparalleled wave of soul searching, re-examination of basic principles and values, and change. All these developments continue today.

## **Sources of Income**

### **THEN:**

Kibbutz economy was based entirely on agriculture at first; later, on agriculture plus industry.

### **NOW:**

Kibbutz agriculture is still significant in a national context, but its relative internal importance has shrunk. Today, only about 15 percent of members work in agriculture.

Industry's contribution has stabilized. In recent years, the number of members working off the kibbutz in white-collar professions has grown.

Also, increasing numbers of kibbutzim run commercial services, such as laundries, restaurants, kindergarten facilities and swimming pools. They have become centers for commercial tourism, weekend shopping and recreation.

## **Equality**

### **THEN:**

For several decades kibbutzim strove for individual equality, based on the idea "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." The kibbutz provided a complete spectrum of services to its members, ranging from toothpaste to housing and from honeymoons to financial aid for dependents living outside. In return, new members were expected to transfer all their assets, other than personal effects, to the kibbutz.

### **NOW:**

Total equality, as an absolute principle, is almost extinct. Kibbutzim generally strive to minimize inequality in terms of communal services offered to members, e.g. food, health care and education. But there is little control over the main sources of inequality: members' private income, such as rent from urban apartments, or money inherited.

## **Wages and Income**

### **THEN:**

Members received a monthly allowance (depending on family size), no matter what work they did. Allocations were made for spending solely on specific items like clothing, newspapers and holidays. (see BASIC NEEDS below)

### **NOW:**

A small but growing number of kibbutzim has already adopted a differential wage system, until recently considered heresy.

The new proposals usually set minimum wages, but higher pay for veteran members and those with responsible jobs, or for off-kibbutz work with high salaries. Members' budgets have been expanded, allowing more consumer choice, e.g. cooking at home or subsidized meals in the dining hall. In other models, members pay the kibbutz a basic tax to cover services, maintenance and social welfare.

## **Labor**

**THEN:**

In the workplace: do-it-yourself; refrain from employing hired labor! Under a system of "rotation," branch managers were elected for a fixed tenure, then replaced; they were considered on a par with workers, though in charge of work schedules. The only off-kibbutz work permitted was in the kibbutz movement.

**NOW:**

In general, members now have a right of refusal as far as workplaces in the kibbutz are concerned. They may work off the kibbutz and there is no limitation on hired - even imported - labor. At present, members make up only 38 percent of the kibbutz industries' workforce. "Rotation" is almost extinct and managers are often hired employees.

**Basic Needs****THEN:**

The practice of mutual responsibility and aid within the community: taking care of all the basic needs of the individual, including employment, housing, food, clothing, transport, health care, education.

**NOW:**

These principles remain largely intact, though substantially reduced in scope. Kibbutz contribution towards bills for food, energy, clothing, transport, housing-maintenance, extra-curricular education and certain non-essential medical expenses is defined, with members paying for those in excess.

**Democracy****THEN:**

Self-management, epitomized by the members' general meeting, which decided major issues, and directly elected committees and office bearers.

**NOW:**

Many kibbutzim still hold general meetings. But direct participation democracy has been replaced by representative bodies and ballot voting.

**Communal Ownership****THEN:**

Common ownership of all assets and common control over the means of production. Important decisions concerning branches were taken by the general meeting in which all members could participate.

**NOW:**

All kibbutz assets are still communally owned. But involvement by members in managing the means of production has been substantially reduced. This is an inevitable result of industrial expansion and the growing number of joint ventures in manufacturing, farming and tourism with private companies. Other factors are the increasing number of non-kibbutz members appointed as directors and managers of factories.

### **Family life**

**THEN:**

As part of the ideology of communal education, children were brought up in children's houses with sleeping quarters, play and study rooms. Parents spent time with their children only after work.

**NOW:**

Since the 1970s, kibbutz life has become "family-centered" with all children raised by their parents and living at home.

### **Social and Cultural Life**

**THEN:**

In the pre-state days, when kibbutzim were smaller, social and cultural life was characterized by togetherness and being "one big family." This found expression in the high involvement of members in planning, organizing and carrying out activities, which ranged from campfires and nature walks to choirs and folk dancing. Each kibbutz appointed a cultural director to plan and coordinate events. The secular kibbutzim adapted the ceremonies for Jewish holidays to suit their beliefs, especially those with an agricultural aspect, e.g. Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. After the establishment of the State, celebration of Independence Day and observance of Memorial Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day were added to the calendar.

**NOW:**

With the advent of cable and satellite television, videos and personal computers, entertainment has become more home- and family-centered.

Parallel to this trend, several regional councils now provide a wide spectrum of organized entertainment for both kibbutzim and other communities under their jurisdiction. In general, the secular kibbutzim continue to celebrate Jewish festivals

together. Weddings and bar- and bat-mitzvahs have become more family-oriented, with only selected guests invited. This is due partly to the decline in the feeling of "togetherness" and partly to the diminishing contribution of the kibbutz to the cost of such events.

### **The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company**

The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company was established in 1970 and developed into one of Israel's most prominent dance companies. Its founder, Yehudit Arnon, established a dance center at Kibbutz Ga'aton and then founded KCDC, drawing talent from the various kibbutz movements. The ensemble appears abroad regularly and has achieved worldwide acclaim. It has developed close connections with international choreographers, but is widely identified with the works of its artistic director, Rami Be'er, born and raised in Kibbutz Ga'aton. KCDC was also a pioneer in introducing children to the world of dance, with special programs for schools.

### **The Kibbutz Orchestra**

Also established in 1970, the Kibbutz Orchestra consists of 40 musicians. It performs over one hundred concerts a year, including a concert series for subscribers, youth concerts, the bi-annual Musica Sacra Festival in Nazareth and regular appearances with the kibbutz choirs and well-known choirs from abroad. The Kibbutz Orchestra also performs fully staged operas with singers from Israel and abroad and hosts famous foreign conductors and soloists. The orchestra gives regular overseas performances and has recorded works by Haydn, Vivaldi and Israeli composers.

### **Kibbutz Population**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of kibbutzim</b>	<b>Kibbutz Population</b>
1910	1	
1920	12	805
1930	29	3,900
1940	82	26,550
1950	214	67,550
1960	229	77,950
1970	229	85,100
1980	255	111,200
1990	270	125,100
2000	268	117,300

### **Geographical Distribution**

**Number of Kibbutzim**



Source: Yad Tabenkin, Research and Documentation Center of the United Kibbutz Movement

## Kibbutz Factory Employment

### Kibbutz Industries: A Snapshot

Kibbutz industry's share in Israel's industry amounts to 8% in sales, 8.6% in exports, 4% in investments and 8% in industrial employment.

Some 356 kibbutz-sited factories and 11 kibbutz-owned cooperatives produce metal products, electronics, plastic and rubber, processed food, optics and glassware, textile and leather goods, medicines and chemicals, office supplies, building materials, toys, jewelry and musical instruments.

Sales in 2000 totaled about \$4 billion, including \$1.3 billion in exports. The leading branches are plastic and rubber (37% of total sales and 45% of exports), food (17.5% of total sales) and metal and machinery (15.3% of total sales). The kibbutz industries export 36% of their products. The leading exports of the kibbutz industries are plastic and rubber (59% of national export) and food (41.7% of national export).

### Fast Forward

As the first decade of the new millennium advances, the kibbutz landscape is undergoing massive and rapid change. From the outset, kibbutzim were never homogeneous clones and differed widely depending, inter alia, on the ethnic



background of their founders, their political beliefs and their economic success. In the 1990s, though, many kibbutzim changed beyond recognition. Now there is a growing division between 'rich' and 'poor' kibbutzim, and 'rich' and 'poor' members within certain kibbutzim. There is also a growing gap between kibbutzim that still try to adhere to the old principles - often the wealthier, economically-independent ones - and those that don't.

With the implementation of the last, vast debt cancellation agreements signed with the government and the banks, some still-unprofitable kibbutzim will have to make major adjustments to survive. Others, surrounded by and intermingling with the residents of adjacent new housing estates built on former kibbutz land, may also face an identity crisis. In many cases the new neighbors are sons and daughters of the kibbutz members, who wish to live nearby without the constraints of kibbutz society, and who will enjoy a much higher standard of living.

In general, though, it seems that most kibbutzim will survive the storms, continuing to represent a unique lifestyle based on a blend of ideology and pragmatism as well as a reminder of a dream that underwent a metamorphosis.

## **Volunteers**

One facet that has endured the ups and downs of kibbutz history is the volunteer program. Every year thousands of young people from abroad come to work in kibbutzim as volunteers. In return they receive a token payment, full board, accommodation and use of the kibbutz facilities, including swimming pools and discotheques. The program has advantages for everyone: for the kibbutz, availability of seasonal workers and economic savings; for the volunteer, a unique opportunity to experience an unusual lifestyle and a base for touring the country.

## **The Future of the Kibbutz...**

*"The economic future of most kibbutzim... is questionable at best. Agriculture is not profitable and relevant enough to attract young people. On the whole, kibbutz industries... cannot generate enough profit to 'keep' a kibbutz. Attaining economic and social viability necessitates a drastic reappraisal of the kibbutz as a communal and economic entity."*

(Freddy Kahana, kibbutz architect, planner and researcher)

*"It seems as though each kibbutz will eventually find its own blend of the old and the new..."*

(kibbutz historian Henry Near)

*"Kibbutzim have entered a period of fragmentation. Some are introducing wages and prices... (There is) a feeling that the end of collective living is near."*

(David Bailey, sociologist, University of Birmingham)

*"... Kibbutzim are involved in a complex process of change and adaptation to the new Western/Israeli social, economic and cultural realities ... They are crystallizing a new*

*vision which will express in 21st century terms the idea of human existence as a social reality..."*

(Kibbutz Cabri internet home page)

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Kibbutzim in Israel

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