Family Life in the Kibbutz of Israel: Utopia Gained or Paradise Lost?

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Introduction

In 1969, the population of the State of Israel was 2,841,100, of which 2,434,800 were Jews, 300,800 Moslems, 72,150 Christians, 33,300 Druzes and others. Three per cent of this population consisting of 84,200 persons lived in collective villages (Kibbutzim).¹

The kibbutz or Kvuta (plural: kibbutzim or kvuzot), communal or collective villages are governed by the general assembly of all members. All property is collectively owned and work is organized on a collective basis. Members give their labour and in return receive housing, food, clothing and social services. There are central dining rooms, kitchens and stores, communal kindergartens and children’s quarters, and social and cultural centres. Individual living quarters provide personal privacy.

The kibbutzim are predominantly agricultural, but many run sizeable industrial enterprises. There are 235 with populations ranging from 60 to 2,000. The first, Degania, was founded in 1909.²

The kibbutz is only one form of rural settlement in Israel.³

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² For a warm and human account of the founding of Degania (Cornflower) see: Joseph Baratz, A Village by The Jordan (London: Harrill Press, 1954).
³ Other main types of settlements are:
   (a) Moshava (plural: moshavot): originally an ordinary village based on private land ownership and private enterprise. Many moshavot have expanded into towns or become partly urbanized.
   (b) Moshav Ovdim (plural: moshvei ovdim): workers’ cooperative small holders’ settlement, based on principles of mutual aid and equality of opportunity. Each member has a farm worked by himself and his family, but produce is sold, and supplies and equipment are bought, through central co-operatives. Some farm machinery is owned by the settlement as a whole. The general assembly elects a council, which approves all transfers of farms and acceptances of new members. The moshav ovdim is purely agricultural and its population ranges from 100 to 1,000. The first was Nahalal, established in 1921.
   (c) Moshav (plural: moshavim): smallholders’ settlement, in many ways resembling the moshav ovdim, but without its rigid ideology. The moshavim are often referred to as...
The founders of the Kibbutzim were predominantly of Polish and Russian origin and their European experience has influenced the kind of community they have established. Eastern European Jews lived in an anti-Semitic atmosphere with social discrimination for a long time and though schools were opened to them later, Jewish students were made to feel that they were strangers.

The culture of the Jewish Polish and Russian village called "shtetl" (small town) produced people who were caricatures of natural and normal men both physically and spiritually, and was viewed unfavorably by the new generation. As a result an opposition to the parental way of living was openly expressed by the youth and a need for change was strongly experienced. The Zionist movement with its love of nature, love of a nation, self-expression, and emphasis on the emotional aspects of life, soon became a model to be imitated and a means of emancipation from the bonds of urban mores and artificial convention. Return to nature and the ascetic life included simple housing, simple clothing and avoidance of make-up by women.

Zionism apart from its original ideology of an escape from Judaism and the culture of the shtetl, involved also the migration to Israel. In 1909 when ninety Jews arrived in Israel, physical conditions were so harsh, that many found it impossible to adjust and either returned to Poland or went to live in the cities. Those who remained founded the Kibbutz. Hardships, lack of comfort and strenuous physical labor, resulted in close relationships, mutual support and strong cooperation.

'middle-class' settlements. There is no standard type, but they are predominantly agricultural. Most are organized in an Agricultural Union. The first and largest, Ramot Hashavim, set up in 1933 by immigrants from Germany, has a population of about 500.

(d) The Moshav Shitufi (plural: moshavim shitufim): is based on collective economy and ownership (as in the kibbutz), but each family has its own house and is responsible for its own cooking, laundry and child care (as in the moshav ovdim). Work and pay are adjusted to individual circumstances.

