**Secular Religion in Socialist Zionism and in the Kibbutz[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

**Zeev Soker**

Preface

In the opinion of some scholars,[[2]](#footnote-2) the kibbutz is an epitomic example of a society that created a secular religion, one that in its values and symbols expresses a conscious rebellion against the traditional Jewish religion and way of life and attempts to create a new Jewish society and person in the Land of Israel. The secular religion that evolved in the kibbutz, these researchers say, is not a unique product of the kibbutz but a radical manifestation of the values of the Socialist Zionist Movement, of which the (secular) kibbutz is an important standard-bearer. Like the Socialist Zionist Movement, the kibbutz did not abandon the Jewish identity but sought instead to reshape it in the spirit of the Labor Movement’s values. Both Socialist Zionism and the kibbutz perceived themselves as carrying Jewish history forward, but in a different and non-traditional configuration based on a new social, national, and human order.

From the first stages of the development of the kibbutz, one may detect sweeping rejection of many religious rituals and observances, particularly those invested with great devotional importance. By the 1920s, for example, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were not observed in any visible way in the Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim; they were totally normal work days. Some kibbutzim did not ignore Yom Kippur but went out of their way to make it “hyper-secular.” In one kibbutz, for example, where a hut was set aside as a synagogue for members’ parents, the gardener headed out to tend the lawn in front of the structure specifically on Yom Kippur.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although the Sabbath was accepted as a day of rest, members did not flinch from going out to work when necessary.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Nissan Rubin’s opinion, labor was elevated to such a level of sanctity that:

Instead of the impiety of workdays as opposed to the sanctity of the Sabbath, the sanctity of workdays and the secularity of the Sabbath were emphasized, because in many cases a member could work on the Sabbath and choose any weekday as the day of rest from labor. That day was considered the member’s “Sabbath.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While Jewish rituals and observances of immense religious importance were neglected or rejected, festivals of secondary religious importance, such as Passover, Hanukka, and Shavuot received much attention. These festivals, however, were not observed along their conventional religious lines; their form and, foremost, their contents were revised and tailored to kibbutz values. For example, the formal frame of the Passover Seder and the Haggada was retained, more or less, but content and meaning of both were substantially revised by means of deletions, revisions, and additions. At a certain time, for example, the passage “Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that do not know You” was omitted from the Haggadot used in Hashomer Hatzair kibbutzim on the grounds that it expressed blind and undifferentiated hate toward entire national collectives and clashed with the idea of fraternity of peoples.[[6]](#footnote-6) Similarly, in many Haggadot, the name of God was deleted from the traditional text.[[7]](#footnote-7) As a case in point, in one Haggada the famous verse “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4) was replaced with “Hear O Israel, Israel our fate, Israel is one.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Here the traditional formal structure was preserved but its contents underwent thorough revision. Even in cases where God’s name was retained, the contentual revision changed the traditional religious meaning altogether. In the traditional version of the Kiddush text for a festival eve that falls on the Sabbath, for example, the following appears:

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who chose us from among all nations […] and sanctified us with His commandments. And You have given us, O Lord our God, Sabbaths for rest and festivals for rejoicing. […] For us have You chosen and us have You sanctified among all nations. […] Blessed are You, O God, Who sanctifies Israel and the seasons.

whereas in the kibbutz version:

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of Desire, Who chose us to sanctify us with labor. And You have given us, O Lord our God, days for labor. [...] For You chose workers and sanctified us. […] Blessed are You, O God, Who sanctifies labor and its festivals.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this case, too, the traditional formal structure of the Kiddush blessing, including God’s name, is preserved. The revision of content, however, propels the worker and labor to the heights of sanctity. In another kind of revision, many Haggadot were adjusted to current affairs, either by adding passages that do not appear in the traditional Haggada or on the basis of existing passages. In the Haggada produced by Kibbutz Sarid in 1938, for example—the year when illegal immigration resumed—the traditional Four Questions were replaced with four others:

Wherefore do our brethren stand on guard at night with no slumber in their eyes? Wherefore do searchlights split the gloom of night and we signal each other in Morse code? Wherefore are exiles’ vessels at night rowed to the shores of the homeland, only to find its gates locked? Wherefore does our joy mingle with sadness and does the nation’s melancholy surpass our happiness?[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. \* The following was written by the late Zeev Soker and published for a course titled “Kibbutz Society—Change and Continuity,” Unit 8—Culture in the Kibbutz: Festivals and Observances (Hebrew) (Ra’anana: The Open University of Israel, 1998). It is presented here with minor revisions. For more on the topic, see Zeira, “We Are Torn,” Fogel-Bijaoui and Sharabi, “Women”; Tzur, “The Kibbutz Culture.” Gratitude is expressed to Nurit Feinstein for her assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Ilana] Shelah, *Indications towards Secular Religion in Israel* (Hebrew), pp. 29–38; [Eliezer] Don-Yehiya and [Charles] Liebman, *The Dilemma* [*The Dilemma of Reconciling Traditional. Culture and Political Needs. Civil Religion in Israel*], pp. 468–470; [Nissan] Rubin, *Bereavement in the Kibbutz* [Personal bereavement in a collective environment: mourning in the kibbutz. *Advances in Thanatology*]; Rubin, *Personal Bereavement,* Liebman and Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion [Civil Religion in Israel],* pp. 30–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Avraham] Atsili, *Hashomer Hatzair, [?*יחסו של השומר הצעיר לדת ולמסורת 1920-1948*]* p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid.; [David] Cnaani, *Second Aliyah,* [The Proletarian Second Aliyah and Its Relation to Religion and Tradition (Hebrew). Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1976] p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rubin, *Bereavement in the Kibbutz,* p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Atsili, *Hashomer Hatzair*,p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Herzog, *The Kibbutz Haggada,]* p. 242.

   [Hanna Herzog, “HaHaggadah ha-kibbutzit” [The Kibbutz Haggadah], *Ha-Kibbutz,* nos. 3–4 (1977): 237–46.] [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rubin, *Bereavement in the Kibbutz,* p. 56; Liebman and Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion,* p. 38; Reich, *Kibbutz Haggadot,* [Avshalom Reich, “Changes and Developments in the Passover Haggadot of the Kibbutz Movement: (Ph.D. diss, University of Texas, 1972] p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rubin, *Bereavement in the Kibbutz,* p. 56;Tzur, Zevulun, and Porat, p. 319.

   [Tsur, M. T. Zevulun, and H. Porat, eds. The Beginning of the Kibbutz (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Sifriyat Po'alim, 1981)] [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Atsili, *Hashomer Hatzair,* p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)