

The Metamorphosis of the Kibbutz

Edited by

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with

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The Post-crisis Kibbutz and Its Relations with the Political Arena

Sigal Ben-Rafael Galanti, Alon Pauker and Michal Hisherik

1 Introduction

During the Yishuv¹ and Israel's early decades, the kibbutzim were closely tied to the dominant Zionist Labour Movement and its parties ('mother-parties'). As such, the kibbutzim – which opted for a socialist life of equality and collectiveness – acted as a Zionist vanguard, assuming national missions – settling outlying regions, security, developing agriculture and industry – in a social-democratic spirit (Near 1992, 1997). These missions yielded status and political rewards from the Labour movement. Kibbutz-members climbed up to the national leadership, the Knesset (Parliament) and the government. At the same time, the mother-parties enjoyed relationship with a prestigious group. In general elections, they received the support of over 90% of kibbutz members, and kibbutzniks seeking a political career turned exclusively to those parties (Ben-Rafael Galanti and Pauker 2013, 188–192).

In the 1977 elections, a turnabout occurred and for the first time the Labour Movement stepped down from power, to be replaced by the right-wing Likud, which has remained in power for most of the 42 years that have elapsed since then. Comparing to the Labour Movement, the Likud is based upon different Zionist visions, and sees the Jewish settlers in the territories captured by Israel in 1967, as the new vanguard of the Zionist ideal (Arian 1997, 84–88). Consequently, the kibbutzim, whose glory has evaporated, lose their direct connection to the main political forces. Those trends, and the dramatic crisis that broke down in the mid 1980s – the kibbutzim crisis² – speeded-up

1 Zionist society in Palestine under the British Mandate (1919–1948), organized as a kind of autonomy.

2 Against the backdrop of the first Likud government's liberalization policy and its implementation, galloping inflation developed without a concomitant reduction in government spending. This spurred capital-market speculators and the plummeting of the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. The 1985 Stabilization program of the government tried to deal with the situation by setting very high interest rates that adversely affected industrialists and farmers, who worked with long-term credit (Rosolio, 1999; Keren, 1996; Goldman, 2000). In consequence, the economy of most kibbutzim collapsed, leaving them to deal with an existential crisis.

sectorialization and exclusive concentration of kibbutzim on survival challenges (Dollery, 2001).

As seen in previous pages of this volume, this was also the time of kibbutzim's launching internal privatization processes. They were willing to abandon their basic *raison d'être* as collective settlements and spearheading of national missions. The culmination of this process was the creation by the government of the Ben-Rafael Committee in order to define anew what a kibbutz stands for. This committee established the distinction of collective and renewed kibbutzim (Ben-Rafael and Topel, 2009, 1–22).³ At the end of a prolonged rehabilitation process, the kibbutzim managed to recover from their crisis both demographically and economically (Cohen, 2018) and became unquestionably a part of the country's middle-class.

Exploring, in this context, the connections between the kibbutzim and the enlarged political arena reveals the weakening of the kibbutzim's ties with the mother-parties. At the same time, one observes that kibbutzim are now investing efforts to build relations with parties that are not their mother-parties (Ben-Rafael Galanti and Pauker 2013, 188–192). The latter's electoral support of the kibbutzim dwindled, while kibbutz members who had turned to political activity did not feel obliged anymore to prefer those mother-parties. It is in this sense that we can characterise the present attitudes of the kibbutzim to the political arena as 'fluid sectorialism'. That is, a willingness of the kibbutzim to refer to any political or bureaucratic center of power, whether connected to the Labour Movement or not, on behalf of particular claims – control of land, support of building projects, encouragement of industry, agriculture and education (Ben-Rafael Galanti and Pauker 2013).

This kind of behaviour is related to the specific circumstances of the kibbutz under the Likud regime and the general Israeli society that in the last decades had become multicultural. (Mautner, Saguy and Shamir 1998, 67–76; Al-Haj 2004; Peleg 2007). Organisational theories assume that the preservation of organisations is a function of the ability to adapt to the values of the environment (Yami and Samuel 2004). They posit that organisations whose objectives have become irrelevant tend to abandon them at the price of giving up on basic beliefs, at the profit of new objectives (Sundarasaradula and Hasan

3 The 'Ben-Rafael committee' was set up following a government resolution on 19 May 2002 in the wake of the wide-ranging processes occurring across the kibbutz movement; its objective was to examine the fundamental question – 'what is the kibbutz'? After in-depth discussions, the committee unanimously recommended determining two new classifications of the kibbutz that would replace the definition of the kibbutz in the regulations of the Cooperative Associations: a collective kibbutz, and a renewing kibbutz.

2005; Dartington 2010; Scott 2016, 183–220). Organisations switch objectives in order to gain an updated moral justification, while avoiding confusion, stagnation, and loss of relevance (Drucker 1999; Seidman 2011). Such organisations also justify themselves on the ground of general social values, even when their chief motivation is mere profit (Alter 2007; Dees 2004; Dart 2004).

All this raises the question of whether or not today's kibbutz remains willing to continue concentrating on its particular material interests, or still aspires to reposition itself as a promoter of value-based objectives towards both itself and the wider society.

This chapter tackles this question from the angle of the local and central kibbutz leaders, connected to the Kibbutz Movement (KM). We characterise the attitudes of these leaders toward the political arena that controls and manages state resources. The material we draw from consists essentially of semi-structured in-depth interviews of past and present leaders – community managers, kibbutz general secretaries, kibbutz chairpersons, heads of regional councils, KM heads, Knesset members (MK) and government ministers. This investigation took place in two samples: toward the end of the kibbutzim crisis in 2009–2010 and afterwards in 2017–2018; the first numbered 15 participants, and the second 20. A total of 35 people were interviewed, some of them more than once. We performed a content analysis of the interviews, and in addition, we relied on primary sources, published by the KM, other kibbutz sources, and general newspapers, internet sites connected to kibbutzim, interviews in the media of kibbutz figures, and, finally, national election data.

2 Sectorialism in the Post-crisis Era

Once their great crisis was over and far-reaching changes implemented, kibbutzim grew interested in emphasising their independence from their mother-parties. This has firstly transpired in voting patterns of members and residents of kibbutzim. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, like the general voting patterns of Israel's middle-class, the kibbutzim witnessed an increase in voting for centrist parties at the expense of leftist mother-parties. In 2009, many kibbutz members voted centrist Kadima – 33% of the ballots. In 2013, Kadima's position was inherited by another centrist party, Yesh Atid, gaining 14%. In 2019, the kibbutzim massively supported another new centrist party, 'Blue and White' (Table 11.1). In tandem, support for the right-wing Likud is also growing in the kibbutzim. This fact may be related to the growing pluralism of the kibbutz population, that now numbers both members and residents.

TABLE 11.1 Knesset election results (%) – 2006, 2009, 2013, 2015 and 2019

| Elections | Labour | Meretz | Centrists | Likud / other right |
|-----------|--------|--------|-----------|---------------------|
| 2006 | 43 | 22 | 20 | 15 |
| 2009 | 33 | 19 | 33 | 15 |
| 2013 | 38 | 21 | 25 | 16 |
| 2015 | 57 | 16 | 14 | 13 |
| 2019 | 21 | 13 | 50 | 16 |

SOURCES: HEITNER, 13 APRIL 2006 – DATA ON 2009 ELECTIONS, THE KIBBUTZ SITE: LESHEM, 23 JANUARY 2013; *KTZAT MI'HASHAVUA* 20 MARCH 2015; THE KIBBUTZ WEBSITE, 10 APRIL 2019

Among the latter, numerous individuals came from rightist and centrist backgrounds. Moreover, among the 'long-rooted' kibbutz members, one also observes a tendency to vote pragmatically, in terms of kibbutz interests which these days predisposes for the right. A related phenomenon is the withdrawal of kibbutz members from mother-parties. Kibbutz members and residents who seek a political career, would choose more profitable choices (Table 11.2).

Lavie Ben-Shimol sums up:

The fact that only a small number of kibbutz members are involved in national politics, and that those who choose that career join a range of parties, removes the kibbutzim from the mother-parties and vice versa ... some elected representatives are willing to help the kibbutzim, those of Labour, Yesh Atid, and some other parties, but they aren't many (Lavie Ben-Shimol, interview, 23 August 2017).

Nimrod Ziv, a kibbutz leader and former head of a kibbutz management firm, views every MK – from whatever party – as a potential address for helping the kibbutzim (Ziv, interview, 20 August 2017).

Haim Yellin, a former head of the Eshkol regional council near the Gaza Strip, who later served as a Yesh Atid MK, holds similar views. According to him, the kibbutz as a sector should stop considering itself a 'classic ally' of mother-parties; instead he praises turning to any political figure or bureaucratic institution ready to help (Yellin, interview, 31 July 2017).

Yehuda Salomon, a former kibbutz secretary and a KM activist, believes that despite all the differences and the ideological distance, it is important to build

TABLE 11.2 Kibbutz members in the Knesset following elections

| Elections | Labour | Meretz | Other parties |
|------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| 2006 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 2009 | 1 until 2011 | 1 until 2011 | 1 +1 from 2011 |
| 2013 | | | 2 |
| 2015 | 1 | | 1 + 1 until 2016 |
| April 2019 | | | 3 |

SOURCES: LIRON, 2010: FORMER KNESSET MEMBERS, THE KNESSET WEBSITE; THE KIBBUTZ MOVEMENT WEBSITE, 10 APRIL 2019

good ties with the rightist regime. According to his experience rightist ministers have always shown respect for the kibbutz (Salomon, interview, 18 August 2017).

Alon Schuster, head of the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council (2002–2019), and MK of the Blue and White party since April 2019, reinforces that point. He contends: 'We have to get used to working even with a government that isn't "ours"' (Schuster, interview, 31 July 2017).

Symbolizing that trend, a campaign by the KM was initiated in the kibbutzim during summer of 2018 under the slogan 'If we don't register in a party, we'll get extinct!'. The campaign called for the massive registration of kibbutz members to any party, leftist and rightist alike. In this regard, Nir Meir explained that he backed that initiative even though as the KM General Secretary he formally represents the kibbutzim within the Labour Party. He contends, such a campaign enhances the kibbutzim's power vis-à-vis the state. 'That's the way things work', he added (Gilboa, 13 July 2018).

Some kibbutzim also investigated ways to leverage their growing economic power as a bargaining tool for negotiating with politicians over resources. Eitan Broshi, who headed the KM and later was a Labour MK, representing the Kibbutz constituency of his party, maintains that in neoliberal Israel, there is room to empower the kibbutzim vis-a-vis government agencies independently from their political allegiances. He suggests setting up a 'peripheral tycoon organisation' that comprises all foci of kibbutz economic power, like the Kibbutz Industry Association, the Farmers Organisation or the regional economic organisations of the kibbutzim (Broshi, interview, 7 September 2017).

Hagai Reznik, who entered the kibbutz as a child⁴ and was raised in the collective education system, became an educator and a leader. Over time, he filled important managerial roles and was recruited to serve as the director-general of the Construction and Housing Ministry. In 2019, he ran – unsuccessfully – for the Knesset with Geshet, a socially oriented moderate right-wing party. He believes that ‘The KM would gain influence wherever it would present itself as powerful’. He suggested boosting the kibbutzim’s political involvement by making use of their power and becoming again an influential actor (Resnick, interview, 16 September 2017). In other words, once their crisis had faded, kibbutz leaders were now to turn to the improvement of their sectorial impact on the basis of their growing economic power (Margalit, interview, 18 August 2017).

At a different level, the kibbutzim also aspire to gain power vis-à-vis the public administration (Avi Yair Angel, interview, 24 August 2017). Yellin explains that it is only natural that a state controlled by the right is not attentive to kibbutzim’s requests in the same measure as the past Labour regime. He recommends that the kibbutzim opt for a lobby-like strategy toward all relevant governmental agencies (Yellin, interview, 31 July 2017). Broshi proposes creating an economic cabinet that would represent all rural localities (Broshi, interview, 7 September 2017).

All in all, today, the kibbutz leadership grants ‘much greater importance to government entities than in the past’, Lavie Ben-Shimol notes. She underscores the close collaboration between the kibbutzim and the regional councils as a mediating body with governmental entities. These councils are ‘close to citizens and their needs’ she explains (Lavie Ben-Shimol, interview, 23 August 2017). Narkiss Regev-Gavish was a kibbutz general secretary for a decade, in tandem with her activity in a regional council. She attests that ‘the regional council is important to the kibbutzim in budgetary terms...’ (Regev-Gavish, interview, 26 July 2017). Drawing on his managerial experience in the Negev, Ziv adds that regional councils are pipelines through which funds flow from the state to the kibbutzim for purposes like ‘housing, education, security, and more’ (Ziv, interview, August 2017). Matters were taken further by interviewees who demanded to institutionalise the connection between the KM, regional organisations, and regional councils. Meir explains that to improve the kibbutzim’s relationships with the national administration, the KM is now streamlining the function of ‘regional coordinators’ for the sake of economic

4 The kibbutzim had welcomed and raised ‘external children’, mainly from low socio-economic backgrounds, as part of implementing their social vocations as socialist settlements.

and social difficulties. The objective is that those coordinators would not represent the KM exclusively, as was once the case, but would act on behalf of three complementary entities: the kibbutzim regional organisations, the regional councils, and the KM. To ensure the efficiency of the coordinators' work, their salaries are to be paid by all three bodies they represent (50% the KM and the rest from the two other bodies). Meir (interview, 21 August 2017) remarks:

My aspiration is that no kibbutz management will take a strategic decision without hearing the regional coordinator's opinion ... because it's proper that these three bodies would find a way to work together for the sake of the kibbutz member.

Sigal Moran (interview, 3 January 2017), head of the Bnei Shimon Regional Council until 2018, agrees that 'The KM must work in collaboration with the entities around it' Schuster sees this collaboration as a guarantee for advancing social affairs, security and education. He stresses the importance of shared efforts by those three bodies in front of strong bureaucratic agencies which are not always positive towards the kibbutzim, such as the Rural Construction Administration, the Housing Ministry and the Administration for Education in Settlements (Schuster, interview, 31 July 2017). Gil Linn (interview, 18 July 2017), who had a career in the high-tech sector, is now the deputy general-secretary of the KM, and contends that

If in the past, agriculture, manufacturing and industry were perceived by the state as nationally valuable, today the cost of living and construction are far more important. Thus, there is a priority for agricultural imports and for rezoning land for construction, while the farmers and manufacturers, including the kibbutzim, sustain far-reaching damage.

He thus emphasizes the crucial role of the collaboration among the three factors of the triangle in order to cope with the bureaucracy.

One can also say that kibbutzim's leaders act nowadays in accordance with what can be expected from the notion of fluid sectorialism, that is without any genuine commitment to specific political powers, and exhibiting readiness for cooperation with any factor that might be of help in view of practical demands.

To be sure, kibbutzim's recovery and demographic strengthening are the primary basis for kibbutz leaders to cope with the challenge of improving their

public power in the political arena. This basis enables them to maximize the realization of their immediate and long-term interests. The leadership's behaviour in this context matches Dart's claims (2004), according to which the key to organisational success lies in blurring the boundaries between social vision and activity.

3 In Search of a *raison d'être*

Researchers, we mentioned in the above, have elaborated on organisations' tendency to evince value-based justification in order to establish their status in society (Drucker, 1999). We also reported contentions that even an organisation essentially turned to 'making-money', tends to present itself as carrying value objectives (Alter, 2007; Dees, 2004). These approaches were echoed in the interviews we conducted. Many interviewees agreed that beyond a sophistication of sectorialism, the kibbutz is to streamline its unique trajectory and objectives to justify its existence. Solomon (interview, 18 August 2017) emphasises that 'the state establishment would wipe out the kibbutzim if it would believe them to be just localities among others'. He added, 'if the kibbutzim could manage to convince others of their uniqueness, they would enjoy a variety of benefits'. That's why Solomon was infuriated by 'Brit Pikuach' – the accounting office of the KM – for advising kibbutzim to pay income tax individually for each kibbutz member and not as a cooperative, due to considerations of short-term profit. This mode, he says, downplays the role of the kibbutz as a cooperative. Our interviewees underline, indeed, that focusing on material interests exclusively, undermines the kibbutzim's self-image as a 'sector' (Solomon, interview, 18 August 2017; Resnick, interview, 16 September 2017). Schuster backs up this argument: 'the depth of autonomy which the state gives us will be equivalent to the depth of the singularity of our lives' (Schuster, interview, 31 July 2017). Meir says that 'For 25 years we were occupied with our survival but now we have to ask, 'what for?'' (Meir, interview, 21 August 2017). It's clear for Schuster that 'kibbutz members will not preserve their uniqueness only because it is worthwhile in terms of the state' and he underscores that this requires a new consciousness (Schuster, interview, 31 July 2017). Regev-Gavish continues on that line, stating that members who have become freer and achieved responsibility for themselves (in the changing kibbutz) 'discover a hunger for an ideological discourse ... because today there is less equality, people understand that a discourse of identities is crucial' (Regev-Gavish, interview, 26 July 2017). Similarly, Muki Tsur, one of the prominent ideologists of the kibbutz thinks that the relevant challenge is connecting leaders' strategy with

grassroots wills, in order to revitalise a conscious vision (Tsur, interview, 21 August 2017).

The importance that the interviewees ascribed to refreshing the kibbutz vision is indicative of a trend to design today's kibbutz as a model of social-democratic aspirations running counter the neo-liberal spirit that predominates outside the kibbutz. Thus, says Meir, 'the kibbutz remains a kibbutz and it's here to stay', explaining that 'the major change that happened to us in recent years is the understanding that ... our role is to maximise the togetherness' (Meir, interview, 21 August 2017).

Schuster (interview, 31 July 2017) remarks that today kibbutz communities have gained self-confidence. They insist now that anyone who wants to join them should do so as a full member. The concern over demographic collapse has passed and therefore 'the kibbutzim no longer need to jeopardise their uniqueness by bringing in residents who are not full partners in rights and obligations' (Schuster, interview, 31 July 2017).

Subsequently, there is a trend reported by interviewees to position the kibbutzim as cooperatives, while honing that idea as the kibbutz identity and as a message to society. This self-presentation of the kibbutz asserts its adherence to the principles of shared ownership of assets, democratic management, reciprocal responsibility and liability. Lavie-Ben Shimol thus believes that the kibbutz is 'the country's largest cooperative system and one of the most significant across the world'. She adds 'The kibbutz presents to the world a healthier way of life, with solidarity, a productive orientation; a system where members manage and design their way of life by their own'. This is the moral justification for today's kibbutzim (Lavie-Ben Shimol, interview, 23 August 2017). Lin and Yellin sustain the idea that the kibbutz should serve as a source of inspiration for society as a whole and, in particular, regarding housing cooperatives, cooperative banks, urban cooperative oriented toward communities, and more (Linn, interview, 18 July 2017; Yellin, interview 31 July 2017).

This is the spirit in which Meir describes the concrete efforts of the kibbutzim aimed at fostering the spirit of cooperation (Meir, interview, 21 August 2017). Tsur, as for him, sees matters from a historical perspective and perceives the role of the kibbutz as being a basis for social innovation and learning democracy in a perspective of renewing cooperation (Tsur, interview 21 August 2017). Tsur and Yellin further explain that the kibbutz is likely to make a significant contribution to the global-ecological discourse, suggesting that it may encourage an educational-cultural-ecological alternative to the dominant modes of urbanisation (Tsur, interview 21 August 2017; Yellin, interview, 31 July 2017).

In brief, the kibbutz leadership is seeking a value-based justification for the actual kibbutz while aspiring to return to its historical task-oriented DNA. However, if in the past, the kibbutzim tended to see its mission in the fulfilment

of pioneering objectives, it now seems placing stronger emphasis on the uniqueness of the kibbutz community as a mission in itself.

4 Conclusion

In its past, the kibbutz implemented an egalitarian and collective life, while perceiving itself as the spearhead of the national revolution. The 1977 political turnabout and the kibbutzim crisis of the 1980s brought about a drastic change of behaviour and perspective. The kibbutz became a non-political fluid sector, more and more detached from past patterns and mother-parties, associated with the Labour Movement. The kibbutzim turned directly to any party or institution that could second them toward material aims. The political identities of its members and residents, as well as the political careers of those who chose to be politicians multiplied and ceased to express unconditional commitments to mother-parties. Those changes most probably contributed to the demographic and economic revival of the kibbutz. They signified that – as suggested by Yami and Samuel (2004) – the kibbutz sought to rephrase its goals and to comply with those of new actors.

Organizational theories, as mentioned, contend that organizations whose goals have ceased to be relevant, tend to abandon them for the sake of new ones (Sundarasaradula and Hasan 2005; Dartington 2010; Scott 2016, 183–220). We asked in this spirit about the basic orientations of the post-crisis kibbutz today. We examined this question through a research among present-day kibbutz' leadership. The interviews reveal that fluid sectorialism has taken root. A major finding is that leaders' tendency is to rely on the kibbutz's growing economic power and renewed self-confidence in order to create and institutionalise formal mechanisms that may improve their ability to negotiate with the present-day actors of the political arena.

Though, the kibbutz leadership also attests that another important motive that account for their ambitions is the affinity to historical values. And indeed, while in the past, the main status of the kibbutz stemmed from performing national missions and the illustration of a utopian *gemeinschaft*-commune, the present-day leadership emphasises a more *gesellschaft*-association social-democrat message. In this way kibbutzim wish to illustrate an inspiring model for their surroundings. In these terms, the kibbutzim today, in the thought of their leaders, seek to define new innovative roles and relevant impacts that might grant them anew a moral status both in their own eyes and in those of the general society.

Referring to Dart (2004) we can also say that the kibbutz is rephrasing its goals, while blurring its boundaries with its surrounding, though still

emphasizing some uniqueness. Moreover, the kibbutz leadership's outlook also appears as compatible with Seidman's perception that sees the success of organisations attached to the encouragement of common activity for the sake of shared endeavours (Seidman 2011). Nevertheless, considering Alter (2007) and Dees (2004) who assert that for-profit organizations which formulate social objectives do so out of economic interests, questions arise about the motivation behind the raising of a cooperative banner: is it genuinely a new expression of the old kibbutz DNA back from the past or a brand new orientation responding to instrumental preoccupations?

Only the future will say. What does come out from our research is that the kibbutz leadership has brought in front of their work a definition that may be interpreted either way and which is, above all, a presentation of a valid and resounding *raison d'être*. This definition may not deny that the renewed kibbutzim are not *gemeinschaft*-commune anymore, but it retains the new kind of *gesellschaft*-association within the borders of intentional community.

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