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A Kibbutz Dilemma: Social Movement or Self-Interested Group?

by

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of the kibbutz was that it belonged to a nation-wide movement, it was open to the outside world and was involved in all aspects of society. In view of the changes taking place in the kibbutzim and in their surroundings the kibbutz may forfeit its characteristics as an assertive and centralized, or at least federative, organization. In consequence the kibbutz may cease to be a social movement seeking to attain goals of universal value and turn into an organized self-interested pressure group. The dilemma faced by the kibbutz is whether it will be a system of egotistic people seeing themselves as shrewd-calculating-yuppies, or members of a social movement seeking to attain goals of universal value, considered by others as “freiers”¹

Introduction

A typical feature of the kibbutz was its affiliation to a centralized and assertive, or at least federative, nation-wide movement. Another characteristic was its openness to the outside world and involvement in all aspects of society: its economy, culture and politics. This stemmed from the need to enable the kibbutz to pursue the tasks undertaken within the framework of the endeavor for national revival, and its role in creating a new socialist society; centralization was necessary in order to gain power, consolidate it and use it for the fulfillment of these tasks.

In view of the current changes, the kibbutz may forfeit these characteristics and in consequence cease to be a social movement seeking to attain goals of universal value through its ideology and way of life, and turn into an organized self-interested pressure group.

A number of changes and processes may well influence the movement as a country-wide and centralized framework, the main ones being:

¹ A vernacular model of a sucker.

Growing individualism: replacing commitment to the collective, is one of the cultural changes taking place in the kibbutz and this reflects a trend existing outside the kibbutz. In the Western world and also in Israel, a selfish, consumer society, characterized by egocentric individualism, is speedily taking shape. The hedonistic consumer culture striking root in the kibbutz as part of its adaptation to the norms and values of the Israeli society, runs counter to the former Kibbutz Movement culture which was characterized by its rejection of the social structure and culture of the surrounding society.

Privatization: one of the expressions of growing individualism, is reducing the partnership and mutual responsibility within the kibbutz and making the individual member more responsible for the needs of his life and budget. This trend is also reflected in the growing lack of mutual concern between the kibbutzim and in their looser relationship to the Kibbutz Movement, in the curtailment of its previous integrative functions and the trend towards fragmentation and disintegration.

Decentralization: (in itself a positive factor), replacing centralization, which was considered by many excessive, together with the strengthening of regionalism, is of a disintegrative nature.

The meaning of “relevance” in a changing world

Throughout the debates about the kibbutz crisis and the need for change, it is constantly asserted that the kibbutz must change in order to become once more relevant in our time, both to society and to its own members. The debate centers on the interpretation of “relevance”. Does relevance mean resembling the surrounding society, adapting to its ways and values and merging with it, or serving society’s “objective” needs by struggling against the trends taking root within it?

Relevance, according to the first approach, leads to liberation from the institutions of an ideological Movement with a centralized organization at its disposal, wielding authority over its members. The kibbutz communities, with their new social structure, economy and organization will no longer need a centralized nation-wide network as it is known today; a federative set-up will suffice, with aims limited to coordination, political lobbying in their own interest and the provision of certain services. The nation-wide organizational framework will adapt itself to the changes taking place in the kibbutzim: while in the past its role was integrative, a source of inspiration, guidance and authority, under the present decentralization, its authority and the definition of its functions will stem from the individual kibbutzim; some think that this will promote the democratization of the Movement. The new catch phrase is: from a Movement which has kibbutzim to kibbutzim which have a Movement (an organization). The latter definition will not include as one of its components the fulfillment of tasks of national interest.

Those arguing against service to the nation mention the weakness of the kibbutz economy; kibbutzim who barely make a living can no longer afford to “answer the call to arms”. Moreover, they maintain that Israeli society no longer wishes the kibbutz to fulfill such a role, so as to obviate the need to reward the kibbutz financially or accord it the prestige it used to have. The strongest argument is that the age of volunteering, of pioneering and altruism is over. “The time has come to acknowledge the existence of the state with its laws, apparatus and budgets; today a volunteer is no longer a Chalutz (pioneer), he is simply ‘a freier’ (sucker)”. And who would want to be “a sucker”?

Relevance according to the more traditional approach raises the question whether kibbutz members can and wish to become once again an elite serving national interests which they themselves determine, defined in the past in kibbutz terminology as “pioneering”. There is a great deal of arrogance or at least pretentiousness in the claim that they know what is “the public good” and that this grants them the right to lead the way. And if the “cohorts” do not follow the pioneer, the elite may decide to act as a movement in conflict with the social order, challenging this order. This course calls for a movement activated by a powerful central organization, able to lead the struggle for the attainment of its goals. This conception would affect the political activity of the Movement and of its members and also the degree of openness and pluralism, both in party politics and in the organization and way of life of the kibbutzim. This attitude also calls for greater stringency towards the changes within the kibbutzim (by drawing the line beyond which a community ceases to be considered a kibbutz), since loose social and economic systems within the kibbutzim will weaken the Movement’s ability to muster resources for the fulfillment of its basic goals. This also leads to a tendency to restrict the growing predominance of the regional frameworks, detrimental to the position of authority of the central system. If the interpretation of relevance described first has the upper hand, the structure of the Movement and its functions are likely to change completely. The kibbutzim will then find it difficult to preserve their uniqueness – even if they wish to do so – without being firmly attached to an idealistic assertive Movement. Involvement, in some form or other, in the surrounding society was endorsed by all the Kibbutz Movements. Yet the Movement framework served as a kind of barrier and helped preserve its unique way of life, while being an expression of this uniqueness. Bringing down this barrier can obliterate all the differences and the kibbutz may come to resemble any other Israeli settlement.

If the second interpretation of relevance becomes dominant and the nation-wide system with its kibbutzim operates like a social movement in conflict with society and its systems, the kibbutz may be defeated in the unequal struggle and disaster may threaten its survival. This may lead to some of the kibbutz cells to cut themselves off, confined behind fences, like communities in other countries, isolated from society in

order to preserve their uniqueness. This outcome would be diametrically opposed to the basic position of those in favor of the interpretation of relevance which calls for involvement enabling to influence society.

Conclusion

The two above scenarios are not necessarily the only possible ones; new frameworks may be created, combining components from the two approaches. Though initially opposed, such a fusion is possible because the type of people in both cases is very similar, and most of those involved have undergone the same socialization process, whether born in a kibbutz or merely brought up on its values. If the protagonists become uncompromising and fanatical, the pessimistic prediction for the two positions may lead to a search for a form of organization which would combine components from both approaches: an elite serving national interests without being seen as “suckers”, and a Movement not neglecting its own interests, yet not reaching the extreme of becoming a narrow-minded pressure group. Such a development would prevent conflicts between members and between kibbutzim, and a way would be found enabling most of the kibbutzim to adhere to a reorganized Movement whose essence and tasks would be redefined.

However, if a confrontation between the two positions takes place and a new integrated design is not created, a conflict between the two camps may take place. The results of the conflict at the heart of the Movement would also affect the individual kibbutzim. Therefore the way the debate is dealt with is very important, not only for the kibbutzim and their members, but for the Israeli society as a whole. In spite of the process of “normalization”, leading our society away from the values of solidarity and pioneering towards Americanized individualistic consumerism, Israel needs voluntary social frameworks which can present an alternative model. Ten to fifteen years ago sociologists and social thinkers in Europe identified the need for new social movements, challenging the existing selfish consumer society, and this need may well arise in Israel. In Europe this gave rise to movements such as The Greens, movements demanding equal rights for women, peace movements against nuclear armament; and when conditions are ripe in Israel, the Kibbutz Movement will be able to play a central, and maybe even leading, role. This will depend on the preservation of the Movement’s framework, with the ideological component remaining a central one (with implications for the kibbutz communities), and on a new definition of the Movement’s identity, goals and structure. This definition will determine whether the Movement will be a system of people seeing themselves as shrewd-calculating-yuppies, or considered by others as “freiers” (suckers).