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JOURNAL OF RURAL COOPERATION



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The purpose of the Centre is to provide a framework for investigations and research on problems concerning rural cooperative communities and publication of the results, to coordinate the exchange of information on current research projects and published works, and to encourage the organization of symposia on the problems of cooperative rural communities, as well as the exchange of experts between different countries.

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The Principle of Temporary Residence in a Collective Community

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Abstract

Nes Ammim is a communal settlement in Israel, populated by European Christians. It is similar to many other settlements, apart from one important characteristic: the condition limiting duration of residence. The population turnover resulting from this condition has repercussions on all aspects of life in the village: the economy, social ties with the surroundings, and social contacts among the residents. The principle of temporary residence has become a built-in limitation for the settlement.

Key words: Communal settlements; temporary residence; religious community.

Historical background

Nes Ammim came into being in the 1960s, established by Dutch settlers who were later joined by Germans. It is situated south-east of Nahariya in the Western Galilee. The ideology that motivated the founders was of a religious nature. Perceiving Christianity to be the root cause of anti-semitism, and thus also of the Holocaust, they sought to atone for these sins by making an economic contribution to the state of Israel. Their mission was to develop close relationships with Jews and to study Judaism in order to ensure that the events of the past would never recur.

The idea, in essence, envisaged the establishment of a European Christian settlement in Israel, which would enable its residents to gain an in-depth knowledge of Jews and Judaism, and to contribute to the economic development of the fledgling state of Israel.

Realization of the idea required parallel activity at three different levels:

- Obtaining a tract of land and permits from the Israeli government;
- Mobilizing people and volunteers in Europe to come and live in the new settlement;
- Mobilizing funds in Europe to implement the practical programs.

It was decided to locate the village in the Western Galilee, since this was a part of the country with large tracts of uninhabited land, without particular Jewish historical

or religious significance. The land of Nes Ammim, which extended over some 1,100 dunams (1 dunam = 1,000 m²), was purchased through an Arab sheik, who persuaded a number of other Arab landowners to sell their land to Christians for a tidy sum.

The state of Israel and the regional council were induced to agree to the establishment of Nes Ammim out of political and economic considerations. Economically, the founders of Nes Ammim proposed to assist the state of Israel primarily through the development of innovative enterprises. More specifically, they focussed on the area of floriculture, since the Dutch had wide experience of growing flowers. The growing of flowers in hothouses was in fact introduced to Israel at Nes Ammim.

Nes Ammim was accepted as a member settlement of the regional council, which appointed a committee to provide counseling and guidance.

Alongside the activity within Israel (persuasion and the purchase of land), considerable efforts were made in Europe on behalf of Nes Ammim. In 1960 a meeting was held in Holland, attended by delegates from Switzerland, Germany, USA and the host country, at which the basic principles of Nes Ammim were discussed and formulated. The name "Nes Ammim", or "standard of nations" (Isaiah 11:10) was chosen on that occasion. Between 1961 and 1964 home boards were set up in Holland, Germany, Switzerland and the USA. The land was purchased in 1962. The village was established as a Swiss non-profit association for tax reasons.

According to a document signed by the founders, Nes Ammim was settled on 15th April, 1963. The first residents, in their late twenties and with a deep religious conviction, saw themselves as fulfilling a mission. They lived under harsh physical and economic conditions, which obliged them to organize themselves as a communal settlement. The kitchen and other services were thus run on a communal basis.

The initial years were a period of social and organizational crystallization. The village underwent several organizational changes before it and the movement reached stability, during the 1970s. Property (land, buildings, and equipment) was owned by economic companies that reported to the Nes Ammim working committee. The settlement itself was registered as a cooperative, which leased the enterprise (all the property on the land) from the central economic body. In other words, the settlers did not own the land.

The residents were thus given the right to make their own decisions, and the authority to manage life in the village. They were committed to submit semi-annual reports. At this time (the early 1970s) the members' assembly was instituted.

Agriculture was chosen as the main occupation for two reasons: firstly, the founders had decided already prior to the establishment of the settlement to mold it according to the Israeli model, *i.e.*, to live off the land; secondly, they sought to emulate the kibbutz, symbolized by agricultural labor. Furthermore, the memorandum stipulated that the village should adopt the pattern of an existing type

of settlement – a kibbutz or a moshav – both of which were agricultural settlements.

The founders chose a communal form of settlement for a number of reasons. Among these was the proximity of Regba, a collective moshav (moshav shitufi, in Hebrew) which “adopted” Nes Ammim socially and organizationally, and became a model for emulation. The communal form of organization also met the immediate needs of the single residents (who constituted the majority), and who came to stay for short periods. The communal services (dining hall, laundry, cars) enabled the single residents to live in the village without having to invest financially in buying or moving household equipment. This naturally encouraged them to come to Nes Ammim. Furthermore, during the 1960s Israel gained recognition as the creator of the kibbutz, which was conceived as a model for a just and worthy way of life. It seemed natural that the idea of identifying with the state of Israel should be realized in a communal way of life.

Most families ran their own households, but were welcome to use the communal services if they so wished. Some families that came for extended periods also brought with them household equipment, such as furniture and a car, thus introducing elements of a classical communal moshav. Most residents regarded their settlement as a kibbutz, without being aware of the differences between the types of communal settlements. Many of the youngsters chose to live on Nes Ammim because they saw it as an opportunity to experience kibbutz life.

The main places of employment were floriculture, the avocado orchard, the carpentry workshop and the guesthouse. Despite their modest, almost Spartan, standard of living, the income generated by the Nes Ammim residents’ labor was insufficient to support them. Nes Ammim was, and still is, supported financially by the organization abroad.

Over the past thirty years several thousand people have resided in the village. At the time of research (1990-1992; 1996), Nes Ammim was populated by approximately 200 people, including the children. Short stayers remain between one and two years. Long stayers come for over two years. Families generally reside in Nes Ammim a few years, to avoid uprooting the children too often. On average, about half of the residents stay for around one year, and most of the others spend two years or less in the village. Over the years, the average length of residency has become ever shorter. Whereas during the 1970s it was quite common for families to stay for seven to ten years, nowadays single residents stay less than two years, and families spend on average three years in the village.

Nes Ammim receives various services from the regional council. The children attend kindergarten and junior school in Regba, and Regba’s medical clinic treats Nes Ammim residents.

The Israeli government’s serious concern about missionary activities led to the imposition of certain restrictions on Nes Ammim’s residents:

- The residents of the village would not become Israeli citizens;
- No more than two hundred and fifty adults would reside in Nes Ammim at any one time;
- The residents would not stay in the village permanently;
- No Jewish families would live in the village (owing to the issue of the education of the children);
- The residents must make every effort to work only in Nes Ammim itself.

These regulations, alongside the temporary nature of residence (to be discussed further) increase the residents' social isolation, leaving Nes Ammim as a village with a distinctly European nature.

Research topics

My research on Nes Ammim raises a number of general questions. Some of the issues that were exposed relate to questions that are relevant to life in collective settlements.

The unique nature of the place – a European Christian population in the midst of Israeli society – and the principle of temporary residence in the village give rise to further questions, the answers to which extend beyond the world of collective settlements.

Extensive research has been conducted on collective communities in general, and on kibbutzim in particular; sociologists have studied this field in Israel since Spiro (1956), Talmon-Garber (1970) and Kanter-Moss (1972), and up to Ben-Raphael (1996), to name but a few of the prominent research projects on collective settlements. Since Nes Ammim was built along the lines of the kibbutz, and since its founders and members explicitly tried to fashion it according to the model provided by a neighboring collective moshav, it will suffice to draw a comparison between Nes Ammim and the Israeli kibbutz.

Nes Ammim reflects problematic issues characteristic of many collective settlements; a contradiction between the aspiration towards economic independence and the realization of social values (Cohen, 1966; Ben-Raphael, 1986); the gap between egalitarian ideology and de facto stratification (Kressel, 1974, 1983; Topel, 1992; Shepher, 1983; Yuchtman-Yaar, 1983); and the individual *vis à vis* the collective (Topel, 1995; Shepher and Shapira, 1992). The community of Nes Ammim has an additional unique characteristic, namely, temporary residence. The transitory nature of the population exacerbates the above-mentioned dilemmas, and generates contradictions and conflicts in additional spheres of life.

Most communities, and particularly communal ones, seek to maintain a stable membership. Those communities that “suffer” from a high turnover among their members view this as an undesirable state of affairs, and seek to remedy it (see, for example, Talmon and Cohen, 1970).

The condition limiting the duration of residence, a regulation, originally imposed by the Israeli authorities as a restrictive measure, was incorporated into the residents' ideology: those who have lived in Israel for some time have a duty to share their experience with their fellow Christians in Europe, thus spreading their knowledge and perceptions to ever wider circles.

Nes Ammim's founding memorandum sets a limit of seven years to residency, which may be extended up to twelve years in exceptional cases. In practice, this limitation induces people to remain for shorter periods. Only families remain in the village for five years, and in most cases no longer than that, owing to considerations related to their children's high school education. Around half the residents of Nes Ammim stay for one year, and most of the others remain for up to two years. Families with children usually remain for three to five years. In the past residents tended to stay longer, but the length of stay has gradually shortened over the years.

Kanter-Moss (1972:214-224) briefly discusses temporary residence in a community, pointing out that very little is known about the effects of high turnover on the relationships within the community. She raises a number of questions: What are the implications for the individual of a transitory pattern of relationships? Does it contribute to a person's ability to form significant bonds with a large number of others, or does it perhaps restrict the depth of cooperation that stems from mutual commitment? Does it generate lack of confidence? How does it affect intimate relationships? The experience of Nes Ammim provides answers to these questions by contributing to our understanding of relationships formed by time-related parameters, namely seniority and length of residence.

Discussion

My observations have led me to conclude that this peripheral regulation has become one of, if not the most influential factor in the life of Nes Ammim.

Length of residence in the settlement divides the population into two distinct categories: long stayers and short stayers, with the former having significantly more rights. Long stayers receive better accommodation and a larger budget for every day expenses. Short stayers are barred from certain key roles, and are not eligible for election to certain committees, nor can they vote in the members' meetings. This discrepancy generates tension and at times animosity, as well as social distance. Short stayers tend to criticize their counterparts for closely guarding their authority and being undemocratic, while they themselves are perceived by the long stayers as irresponsible and unwilling to take on commitments. These are well known tensions in cooperatives, when the rules of democracy turn out to be not the formal ones but those of stronger groups such as the veterans. Compromises on democracy become more evident in the informal aspects. Owing to the turnover, the few people who reside in Nes Ammim over an extended period are the ones with the knowledge and the experience. They are therefore always given the key roles. The secretary and

economic manager have considerable influence. This phenomenon of concentration of power in the hands of the incumbents of key positions is prevalent among many democratic collective settlements. In Nes Ammim, those serving for long periods in a central position acquire a far greater degree of power *vis-à-vis* the general population, lacking in knowledge and experience, than is stipulated by the formal regulations. Seniority is thus a source of authority, associated as it is with accumulated knowledge, in addition to the esteem and recognition enjoyed by the long satyers.

The senior members also have a proximity to the ideology. They knew the founders or the first residents of Nes Ammim, or at least those who learnt from these pioneers. They have a deeper knowledge of the constitution, having had recourse to it on previous occasions. In a certain respect they represent the ideology and interpret it, thereby acquiring additional authority.

The differential length of residence also affects the unstructured relations in the sphere of friendship and informal activities. The old timers keep very much to themselves. The considerable turnover gradually affects their willingness to get to know the newcomers, whether out of increasing lethargy or as a means of avoiding further painful partings. These old timers, close to the ideology, feel more deeply committed to the community as a whole than to other issues, such as the absorption of the newcomers. This gives rise to conflicting approaches and interests.

The newcomers are aware of the situation, and tend to close ranks. The relations among themselves are more important to them than the good of the community. The many privileges enjoyed by the old timers on occasion generate anger towards them. The newcomer / old timer dichotomy thus takes on an additional social dimension.

A sphere in which the lack of continuity is spoken about openly is the economic one. Many discussions were devoted to the "problem" of the lack of stability and high turnover of personnel, mainly with regard to managerial roles requiring expertise in the various branches.

The high turnover did indeed perpetuate lack of professionalism and led to continual loss of knowledge and expertise. The economic branches were mostly run by inexperienced people. Policy was not implemented over a reasonable period of time, since newly arrived managers and teams tended to overturn the decisions of their predecessors. The non-profitability of various branches (*e.g.*, the carpentry workshop, floriculture, and the guesthouse) was attributed mainly to the lack of expertise on the part of the personnel, and particularly of the branch managers.

This phenomenon of a lack of skills due to turnover of personnel is particularly evident in floriculture, one of the central economic branches. The workforce, which is based mainly on young volunteers who come to Nes Ammim on a special Work and Study program, is replaced every year. Since this branch involves hard and intensive physical labor at certain periods, even those who remain in the village for over a year generally move to a different branch once they have completed their stint in the roses.

Thus, each year new, inexperienced workers have to be trained from scratch.

The problem is aggravated in the case of the branch managers, among whom turnover is also rapid. Within a relatively short period the branch manager is the only person with a store of accumulated knowledge. However, he has nobody in the village with whom to consult, and must seek out external Israeli consultants. He often starts the job with a limited amount of knowledge. Indeed, one of the main attractions of Nes Ammim for young people beginning their professional career is to assume overall responsibility for a branch. This is something that they could not expect in their countries of origin. Then, after two to three years, the young manager hands over his position to the next volunteer.

In order to improve Nes Ammim's economic situation it was decided to follow the recommendations of an outside consultant to hire paid managers committed to stay for an extended period, and to reduce the number of families in the village, since they were economically less viable. The expert managers received regular salaries, unlike the other residents, whose income was minimal. This development naturally contradicted the principle of equality. One of the consequences of this policy was increased population turnover. These decisions met with strong objection and were finally modified.

Relationships with the outside world were also affected by the limited residence duration regulation. People coming for a short period tend not to invest their time and effort in the difficult task of cultivating social relations with Israelis.

Some residents have little interest in developing ties with the outside society. They come to Nes Ammim to experience life in a small community, to live abroad, or to give themselves an opportunity for introspection (mainly in the case of the youngsters).

Furthermore, they do not make the effort to learn Hebrew, since the considerable effort involved in learning the language is not worth while for those staying for short periods. Those who do decide to try and learn Hebrew (mainly those planning to stay for longer periods) are restricted by lack of free time for study, and in particular the lack of opportunity to speak Hebrew.

This creates another barrier to contact with the locals. It is naturally easier to socialize with those who speak your language, particularly if they are in close physical proximity.

Many Nes Ammim residents do not feel the need to leave the village. All their social needs – work, entertainment, and company – can be met within the confines of Nes Ammim. Others feel more “secure” within the village, among acquaintances from the same cultural background, and are not drawn beyond the confines of the settlement.

Several objective conditions restrict residents' opportunities to venture outside the village. First and foremost is lack of time. Those in key social roles, burdened

by one meeting or discussion after another, often held after work hours, do not find the time for activities outside Nes Ammim. Some view the continued existence of the settlement as of greater importance than meeting people from the surroundings, and devote all their time to this end. Others, who spend long hours on strenuous physical labor, are simply too tired to engage in social activities outside the village. The people of Nes Ammim thus prefer to spend their limited free time in the village.

Mobility is also circumscribed by a lack of resources. Most residents do not own a car. While the veterans can use one of the village's vehicles, this involves prior coordination, waiting in line, and payment. The youngsters lack sufficient money for travel. They consequently make short distance bicycle trips or remain in the village.

The social boundaries of Nes Ammim are therefore demarcated very closely to its physical territory, and emphasize the clear distinction between Nes Ammim residents and their neighbors.

On the other hand, the Israeli neighbors, who at first made an effort to invite and visit Nes Ammim residents, became weary at having to forge new social bonds every so often. Although the children studied in an Israeli school, friendly relations were not established and most of the contact was of a formal nature. Thus, neither adults nor children had many informal social ties with their neighbors.

The children of Nes Ammim are those most adversely affected by the condition of temporary residence. They, more than the adults, practice the ideology of getting to know Israelis. The price they pay is generally to repeat a year at school, since they have to learn Hebrew and adjust to the local curriculum. Many of the children do not make too much effort at mastering the Hebrew language, knowing that their stay is temporary. In most cases their parents cannot help them with homework because of the language barrier.

Children are quite often isolated within the circle of Nes Ammim children. Lacking peers of the same age, they associate with much younger or older children. Some parents decide to leave earlier than they originally planned because their older children have no playmates of their own age.

All children frequently experience parting from their mates. It is difficult to maintain long-standing friendships when families are constantly returning home to Europe.

Summary

Communities in general, and communal communities in particular, seek to maintain a stable population. Communities that "suffer" from a high turnover among their residents usually try to improve this situation and to bring about greater stability.

Nes Ammim constitutes a special case in which instability is built into the structure of the community. This lack of continuity is a leitmotif associated with most of the social phenomena in the village. It penetrates the economic sphere, social relations with the neighboring environment, and relations between different

categories of Nes Ammim residents. It also severely tests other basic principles of the community's structure, such as democracy and economic equality.

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