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An Experiment That, for a Time, Did Not Fail

By Leonard Fein

“Those were the days, my friend, we thought they’d never end...”

That song may be much on the lips (or, more likely, in the hearts) of veterans of Israel’s now nearly comatose kibbutz movement. It may seem a bit odd to be talking about the kibbutz movement, home to less than 2% of Israel’s people, at a time when huge arguments regarding the future of Israel’s settlements in the West Bank (not including East Jerusalem, some six% of the total Israeli population) rage on, when the Iranian threat to Israel is a headline item, when Israel itself appears to have taken a sharp turn rightward.

But 2009 turns out to be the 100th anniversary of the founding of the first kibbutz, Degania Alef, and in recent days, one of the more venerable kibbutzim, Ein Harod (founded in 1921) has decided to join the apparently unstoppable trend to privatize the kibbutz — in effect, to put an end to the century-old utopian experiment. Martin Buber once famously wrote that “the kibbutz is an experiment that has not failed.” Indeed, for some decades it seemed to be an experiment that had succeeded. Amos Oz, 20 years or so ago, used to describe the three greatest achievements of Israel as the revival of the Hebrew language, the reconstruction of Jerusalem, and the invention and institutionalization of the kibbutz.

But by now it appears that Buber would have been more accurate a prophet had he said that “the kibbutz is an experiment that has not *yet* failed.” For what privatization means, for better or for worse, goes well beyond an end to group homes for children from the time of their birth, beyond the hiring of outside labor, beyond enabling kibbutz members to take jobs in the private sector. It has come to mean acceptance of wage and income differentials, and in a growing number of instances, private ownership of one’s apartment (with, therefore, the ability

to sell or bequeath it) and personal responsibility for health insurance and for educational expenses. Some former kibbutzim have given up the word “kibbutz” itself; others describe themselves as “renewed.” Such “renewal” happens only when endorsed by at least 75% of the membership, but that has turned out not to be a deadly obstacle; of Israel’s 268 kibbutzim, there remain only about 20 that have resisted differential salaries/incomes and the other key elements of privatization.

To describe the new arrangement as a new bottle for old wine is a deception, even if the object of the deception is the kibbutz membership itself. There’s a point at which adaptation morphs into transformation, and the “renewed” kibbutzim have crossed that point, quite substantially.

An example: A kibbutz family: The wife is a very successful graphic designer in a major advertising firm in Tel Aviv; her husband is a senior executive of a high-tech firm near Tel Aviv. Together, they earn 30,000 shekels a month. When so disposed, they fly off to Paris for a long weekend. Their children are enrolled in a variety of enrichment programs. On the kibbutz, they live next door to a couple of the same age, the same classes in school — he works in the dairy, she cares for a dozen pre-schoolers. Together, they earn about 8,000 shekels a month. Now and then, they permit themselves a trip, with their children, to Tel Aviv.

That may not sound strange or be particularly disturbing to Americans — or, for that matter, to most Israelis. After all, income differentials in Israel are just about the same as in America, the highest in the industrialized world. But that was not the way of the kibbutz, which essentially practiced the principle “from each according to his means, to each according to his needs.”

A variety of factors led, over time, to the transformation. Some kibbutzim faced bankruptcy, and chose to loosen the communal bond. The development of a modern economy in Israel meant a huge expansion of economic opportunity, and many kibbutz members wanted to grab hold of — and directly benefit from — such opportunity. And most kibbutzim discovered that some number of their members had become — well, the word is “parasites,” shirkers who enjoyed the benefits of the collective but made little or no contribution to its economy.

The transformed kibbutz does guarantee a minimum wage, typically funded by a “dues” system that amounts to a progressive tax. In that sense, it remains a community of shared

responsibility. But you can safely bet that before long, there will be a Disney-like “model kibbutz,” intended for curious tourists who want a glimpse of what it was like in olden times. Actors will be hired and authentic reconstruction will be the goal. Perhaps the creators will find a way to communicate the outsized role of the kibbutz, during the 1940-1970 period, in providing the nation’s key personnel in government, in diverse emergencies and, most consequentially of all, in the Israel Defense Forces — especially in the air force and in the officer corps. (Of late, Orthodox Jews have come to much greater prominence in the officer corps.)

In many ways, the transformation of the kibbutz mirrors a similar transformation in the larger Israeli culture, which has moved from a decisively collectivist orientation to a dramatically enhanced emphasis on the individual. Some will celebrate the shift, others lament it. Either way, it is well to pause in honor of the nobility of the experiment, and perhaps as well to hope that newer forms of communal association will, in time, be developed, new experiments undertaken. Already, there has been a proliferation of “urban kibbutzim,” some of which may prove more than ephemeral. So if we are going to sing a song about the days that were, we should also sing for the day that is to come. “Just because the day is over,” go the words of one Hebrew song, “let my soul not mourn; the stars twinkle at me and hint, ‘Hope for the day that is to come.’”