The Kibbutz

Introduction

Sharing is hard, but our lives would be dreadful without it. Our families get along because of sharing. Our schools operate smoothly because of sharing. Our cities and our whole country would fail if the citizens were unwilling to share.

Of course, aren't we usually expected to share everything with everyone. Maybe you're used to sharing your computer or athletic equipment with a sibling—but probably not with the family next door or the couple who lives down the street.

Some societies, however, have been built on the idea that everything should be shared among members of the community—from labor to decision-making to property to profits. This idea is known as “communitarianism,” and it has had perhaps its fullest expression in the kibbutzim of the Land of Israel.

In this lesson you will learn about the people who founded Israel's first kibbutzim, about the ideas that were important to them and the institutions they set up. Then you will have an opportunity to create your own kibbutz—on paper, at least—to see what the process of setting up these communities of sharing might have been like.
The first kibbutzim were established by the wave of immigration to Israel that historians call the Second Aliyah. These were mostly young Russian Jewish men and women who were leaving behind the poverty and persecution of life in Russia to settle in the Land of Israel in the first two decades of the twentieth century. At the same time millions of other Russian Jews left their homes to settle in the cities of North America. The Jews of the Second Aliyah, however, chose perhaps a harder route—to settle in a land whose soil was not the most fertile and whose local (Arab) population was not the most friendly.

But the Jews of the Second Aliyah found strength in the knowledge that by settling in the Land of Israel they were creating a revolution in Jewish history. They were guided by two key ideas: Zionism and socialism. Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people as a nation must be reunited in the historic Jewish homeland of the Land of Israel. Socialism is the belief in the economic and political equality of all people—that there should be no rich or, no powerful or powerless classes in society. The set of ideas that blended Zionism and socialism became known as Labor Zionism.

The Labor Zionists of the Second Aliyah came to the Land of Israel eager to create a new Jew—tanned, brave, and muscular, as opposed to what they considered to be the pale, cowardly, and weak Jews they left behind in Russia. They believed that this transition could be accomplished only by agricultural work with the blessed soil of the Land of Israel. The hard work of their labor would transform them as Jews and thus transform the Jewish people as a whole. For these young men and women, draining a swamp or planting a tree was נָבַלְוָה avodah—a Hebrew word that means both work and worship.

From the start, the Labor Zionists who settled in Palestine during the Second Aliyah lived together in communities that required cooperation. But in 1910 a settlement was founded that experimented with the total equality that would become the defining characteristic of the kibbutz. This settlement, on the edge of Lake Kinneret, was named Deganyah, and its members pooled their financial resources, made all important decisions as a group, and divided up the labor among themselves—working in the fields to prepare the meals to raising the children.

The members of Kibbutz Deganyah liked the new kind of community they had set up.

Do you agree with the goals of Labor Zionism? Why or why not?

Jot down your thoughts here:

The children of Kibbutz Deganyah, circa 1920. Photograph courtesy of the Jewish National Fund.
up. Since everyone was responsible for helping make the kibbutz successful, everyone felt equal and included and important. The kibbutz idea spread, and by 1920 there were more than forty such settlements in the Land of Israel. Most were quite small, with only ten or twenty members. But the various kibbutzim began working together to help encourage more and more of the Jews arriving in Palestine to consider the kibbutz lifestyle.

1920: In the 1920s the kibbutz movement grew rapidly. Large numbers of Jews from Russia and Poland arrived in Palestine eager to contribute to the Labor Zionist cause, and settling on kibbutzim or founding new ones was a way to show their enthusiasm for Zionism and socialism. Many of the kibbutzim were founded in rocky or swampy areas, but through hard work and innovative agricultural techniques kibbutznikim drained swamps, cleared rocks, and “made the desert bloom.”

1930: The 1930s brought even more growth to the kibbutz movement, with new kinds of kibbutzim, including religious kibbutzim and non-socialist kibbutzim. Some of the older kibbutzim continued to accept new members, until some of them had hundreds of Jews living and working as one economic unit. By 1939 more than 5 percent of the Jewish population of Palestine lived on kibbutzim.

1940: In the 1940s the hard work of the early kibbutz pioneers began to pay off as new agricultural techniques led to greater profits. At the same time, kibbutz members took leadership roles in the efforts of Palestinian Jewry to rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe and to establish an independent State of Israel.

1950: Many of the State of Israel’s first politicians and military heroes grew up on kibbutzim, and in the 1950s they helped guide the State of Israel in its first decade. At the same time the kibbutz movement was split by a series of debates over the future of kibbutzim, such as how much socialism was necessary and whether some of the traditional rules of community property could be changed. Still, kibbutzim captured the imagination of the world, and a kibbutz was a must-see stop on any tourist’s agenda while in Israel, and young people from all over the world, Jews and non-Jews, came to live and work on kibbutzim for short or long periods of time.

1970-1990s: In the last several decades the kibbutz movement has seen a steady decline. The younger generations of Israelis have been less committed—if at all—to socialist ideas than the pioneers of the early twentieth century. Most Israelis prefer city life and the ability to have one’s own money and property, and the kibbutzim have had a hard time recruiting new members, while more and more children born on kibbutzim choose to leave them once they become adults. Also, some of the kibbutzim have fallen on hard economic times, unable to compete effectively in a global economy.

Nonetheless, the kibbutznik represents to many people the typical Israeli—hardworking, in love with the land, and committed to the future of the Jewish people.
Map of Your Kibbutz

Use this space to map out your kibbutz. What buildings will you need? Remember that kibbutzim have to address both the business needs of the kibbutz's products and the daily life needs of their members.
Now you have an opportunity to build your own kibbutz.

1. Choose a Hebrew word or phrase that you like and name your kibbutz.

   My kibbutz will be named Kibbutz _______________________________.

2. Use the blank space on page 4 to plan the layout of your kibbutz. What buildings will you need? Remember that kibbutzim have to address both the business needs of the kibbutz's products and the daily life needs of their members.

3. On the bottom of this page, write part of a Kibbutz constitution. You may want to write a Preamble in which you state the goals of your kibbutz, as well as several of the rules your community will live by.
Living on a kibbutz is a vastly different experience than living in a city or town or on a private farm. While the characteristics of kibbutz life have varied over time and among the different kibbutzim, some features are fairly widespread. The basic rule of kibbutz life is equality. When a new member joins a kibbutz she gives everything she owns to the kibbutz and in turn becomes an owner—along with every other kibbutz member—of all kibbutz assets.

Kibbutznikim have no private property. If a kibbutz purchases a bicycle, for example, it might be kept at one member's house for that member's use. But it still belongs to the kibbutz, and months later it might be assigned to someone else. Kibbutz members eat all meals together in a communal dining hall, and in the early days living quarters had no private bathrooms or showers—members would use communal toilets and showers instead. Special treats such as trips abroad are granted to kibbutz members on a rotating basis every several years depending on the kibbutz's finances.

Labor on the kibbutz is divided up equally. Often that means members take turns doing various jobs—which include the main "businesses" of the kibbutz, such as picking oranges or making wine, but also includes the various activities necessary to the ongoing operation of the settlement. Such kibbutz jobs include laundry, cooking meals, washing dishes, and teaching children.

Sometimes kibbutz members could become doctors and other professionals, however. If a kibbutz member wanted to go to medical school, he would ask permission from the kibbutz leadership, and if they said yes, the kibbutz would pay his tuition—and keep all the money he earned when he saw patients (of course, sick kibbutz members could go to him for free).

From the start Israel's kibbutzim have been committed to equality of the sexes. Many of the first female kibbutz members were particularly insistent on being treated the same as the men—in manual labor as well as decision-making.

Decision-making on the kibbutz, like everything else, is done as a group. Leaders are elected, but the most important choices the kibbutz makes are made as a group, in kibbutz meetings.
Particularly in the early years, joining a kibbutz was a total commitment that entailed embracing a lifestyle of radical equality. Members traditionally never called each other “sir” or “ma’am” or “Mr. Goldberg” or “Mrs. Cohen.” Instead, every kibbutz member was Haver, which means friend or comrade. Sometimes, when a kibbutznik chooses to leave the kibbutz, friends and even family members have been known to never speak to him or her again—out of shame and anger that would betray the kibbutz family by abandoning it.

Finally, the raising of children is perhaps the most unusual—and controversial—aspect of kibbutz life. Although not all kibbutzim still follow this procedure, traditionally infants and children on a kibbutz grow up in separate children’s quarters and not with their families. Although they spend some time with their parents on evenings and weekends, most of the time kibbutz children are raised as a group with other children their age. Typically kibbutz children develop intense bonds with their peers, who play the role of both sibling and friend.
Asseyfat ha-Haverim (A Meeting of the Kibbutz Members)

A Kibbutz is a lot like a small town with a town meeting. Everyone in a Kibbutz gets to speak his or her mind. Everyone in a Kibbutz gets to vote. A Kibbutz is very much a democracy. What follows are three issues that almost every Kibbutz has debated. Hold your own Kibbutz meeting(s) and debate these questions.

1. **Should our Kibbutz hire outside workers to help in the fields and to help in our factories?**

   **AGAINST:** Our Kibbutz was started with the idea that everyone would work as hard as they could and that everyone would be paid an equal share. The ideal was “each according to their need—each according to their abilities.” Hiring workers who are paid a salary destroys that ideal. We will become just like every other boss, exploiting workers so that we can make a profit. We set up our Kibbutz to change the work-a-day world, if we hire workers, we will become what we tried to change.

   **IN FAVOR:** There are some jobs on our Kibbutz that no one wants to do. There are some jobs on our Kibbutz which take more labor than we have available. If we hire workers to do the menial jobs in the fields and in the factories, Kibbutz members will be happier, because they can use their time in more valuable ways. If we hire workers to do those jobs, our Kibbutz can make much more money and provide a much better lifestyle for all our members.

2. **Should our Kibbutz close our children’s house at night and therefore allow our children to sleep at home with their parents?**

   **AGAINST:** Kibbutzim were set up to free women from being trapped in domestic roles as mothers and wives. Meals were made and served communally so that everyone could work equally. Children were cared for in the children’s house so that mothers and fathers could work at any job they chose and so that the job of child rearing can be shared by many members of the Kibbutz. Parents will get to spend quality time with their children, more and trapped at home. If we do this, the communal structure of the Kibbutz will break down as families become more central.

   **IN FAVOR:** It is time to change the way we live. Children will still spend from early morning until late afternoon in the children’s house, being raised by Kibbutz members and sharing their lives with other Kibbutz children. But, now both parents and children will indeed have a much stronger sense of family. This should cut down on the Kibbutz divorce rate that is high, and give children a much more secure place in the world. It is the best of both worlds, both the Kibbutz sense of community and the family that has worked for thousands of years.

3. **Should Kibbutz children be allowed to have a religious ceremony (with a rabbi) for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah?**

   **AGAINST:** Up to now, the Bar Mitzvah class has gone through special tests and gone on a special trip together for their Bar Mitzvah year. The ceremony was not religious because our Kibbutz was not religious. The ceremony was not individual because our Kibbutz wants to emphasize the community over the individual.

   **IN FAVOR:** Jews all over the world mark Bar and Bat Mitzvah with a family party and with their children reading from the Torah. The time has come to connect our children to the Jewish people as well as to this Kibbutz.