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Here on Earth: A History of the Kibbutz

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Preface

We were always telling ourselves our story. Compulsively. Out loud. All the time. Sometimes we got tired even before we began, but we still told it for hours. We listened to each other intently. Because every time we told the story we learned new details. Even years later, when we were no longer there.

Yael Neeman, *We Were the Future: A Memoir of the Kibbutz*[1]

To tell the story of the kibbutz is to tell a story that was told a myriad of times, in a myriad of versions, from the very inception of the kibbutz in the beginning of the twentieth century to this day. I do not think there was another group of people in history who documented themselves so thoroughly, even obsessively, as those who founded the kibbutz and those who lived in it in the decades to follow. Those people were acutely aware that they were part of a radical experiment in which even the trivialities of everyday life had ideological and national—if not universal—significance, and they archived their struggles, their joys, their quarrels, their victories, their frustrations, and their heartbreaks meticulously, orally and in writing. This book is my attempt to weave a historical narrative from the stories that the people of the kibbutz told about themselves and from the stories that others told about them. I never lived in a kibbutz, yet the kibbutz's story is embedded in my cultural DNA, and it is one to which I am, for reasons that I will try to explain, deeply attached. It is a story that I was raised with, and it is a story to which I decided to return as an adult with some historical training in order to explore and embrace it for all its complexity, free of any impetus either to inculpate or exonerate.

I grew up in Israel in the 1980s and the 1990s, and I grew up believing that I was living in the most beautiful and just place in the entire world. Love and admiration for the country were fostered in every possible venue—in the home where I grew up, by parents who were staunch Zionists raised by staunch Zionists, and in the very ideologically driven school curriculum, but especially through the songs that played on the radio and on television, songs that have infiltrated my bloodstream and that still move me to tears to this day, even as I have serious misgivings about some of their content and rhetoric.

In the songs and stories and school textbooks of my childhood, the story of the country was told over and over again in different ways, but the fairy tale was always the same: the Jews lived in this country from the time of the Exodus from Egypt until about two thousand years ago, when they were cruelly banished from it by vicious invaders. For the next two thousand years they lived in exile, missing their homeland and yearning for it in thoughts and prayers while suffering persecutions and humiliation. Then, about one hundred years ago, the great awakening began: a small number of brave and prescient Jews decided that it was time to go back to the land that had waited for them all these years. With herculean determination and ungodly strength, they persuaded others to join them and overcame harrowing difficulties—malaria and locusts and heat and famine and oppressive foreign regimes, first Ottoman and then British—and have made for us this beautiful, prosperous country we live in, which is now a proud and independent state. Those Zionists who came to the Land of Israel in the beginning of the twentieth century were the princes who woke the princess Zion from her accursed slumber—not with a kiss but with the sweat of their brow, by building and plowing and sowing and fighting. Our debt to them was one that could never be paid, except by following in their path. "The Land of Israel," by the way, was the name designated for the country before it officially became "the State of Israel" in 1948. The word "Palestine," by which the country was otherwise known prior to Israel's statehood, was never used.

At the pinnacle of the story with which I grew up, as the jewel in the crown of the Jews' revival in their homeland, stood the kibbutz. There was no question that the most brave and resilient princes(ses) of Zionism, the ones who were truly fearless and idealistic, were those who established the kibbutz, and in my childhood there was no question that the best people in Israel, the people we all wanted to be like (or were supposed to want to be like), were those who lived in a kibbutz. The word *kibbutz* (plural *kibbutzim*)—most accurately translated as "collective"—denotes both a kind of place and a kind of community. As a place, a kibbutz is (usually) a village with rural, agricultural characteristics; as a community, a kibbutz is a group of people, numbering between a few dozen and a couple thousand, who agree to share all assets through collective ownership and whose lives are dedicated to jointly building and sustaining their kibbutz—as a place and as a community—socially and financially. Throughout this book, the word *kibbutz* may refer to a particular place/community that identified as such, or it may indicate the ideological movement that bound these communities together and that permeated nearly every aspect of their lives.

As a child, I must admit I did not know much about the ideology of the kibbutz or what everyday life in one looked like. To me, a kibbutz was first and foremost a beautiful place, lush and green, with small one- or two-story houses, chirping birds, and extraordinary peace and quiet. It was associated in my mind with people calmly riding bicycles in blue work clothes, with suntanned and strikingly

confident children who walk barefoot, even in the winter, and with a sense of freedom and independence. It was paradise on earth.

I grew up in Jerusalem, a city that was the opposite of a kibbutz in every possible way. Jerusalem was very, very, old—biblically old—whereas the kibbutz was new, born of the modern era brought about by secular Zionism rather than of the centuries-old fanaticisms of three different religions. The kibbutz's small houses and fields and open spaces stood in stark contrast to densely built, overcrowded Jerusalem, with its narrow streets that were designed for donkeys but had cars and buses driving through them, emitting dark smoke and the angry sounds of horns. In Jerusalem the population was famously heterogenous, consisting of mutually hostile factions (ultra-Orthodox and secular, European Jews [*Ashkenazim*] and Middle Eastern Jews [*Mizrahim*], Jews and Arabs, rich and poor, and holiness-intoxicated tourists to round it all out), whereas in the kibbutz everyone looked and talked the same—that is, like able-bodied and nonsense-free natives. As for me, I did not know how to ride a bicycle (and still don't), I was not confident and definitely not suntanned, and I was not very independent or free. But I wanted to be different. I wanted to live in a kibbutz.

There were about 250 kibbutzim in Israel at the time, the residents of which constituted about two percent of the Jewish population (at their peak, around 1949, they constituted about 7.5 percent of the population). But almost everyone I knew had some relation to a kibbutz, usually in the form of friends or relatives who lived there, and it was a relation that one flaunted proudly. "My" kibbutz was Degania Aleph, which has a particularly high pedigree because Degania was the very first kibbutz ever to have ever established. Degania was my favorite place in the entire world and a place where I always assessed other possibilities for myself and for my family.

I was the third generation in my family to have a close connection to Degania and to see it as a place where an alternative life and an alternative self could have materialized. My mother's parents were members of a Zionist youth movement back in Poland prior to their immigration to Palestine in the 1930s. They fully intended and prepared themselves to settle in a kibbutz (at least so the story goes), but that ended up not happening. However, their closest friend from the youth movement, Yosef Ganani (né Gertner), settled in Degania in 1936, and there he met his future wife, Berta. For my grandparents, Yosef and Berta were like siblings, and the families were very close, so much so that Yosef and Berta served as surrogate parents to my mother and her sister. Whenever my grandparents were away (which was often), my mother and aunt went to Degania, sometimes for months at a time. At Berta's funeral in 2010, my mother eulogized her, openly calling her "my second mother."

My mother spent extensive periods of time in Degania, and she grew up with a strong sense that it was her true home and with a firm conviction that she would live there when she grew up. She never lived in Degania as an adult, but this was where our family went on every school holiday—when I got older, I started going

there on my own as well—and Berta and Yosef's son, Odi, and his wife, Havah, were like surrogate parents to me. I loved everything about Degania (first and foremost, I loved Odi and Havah and Berta and Yosef with all my heart), and one summer vacation between eighth and ninth grade, I also fell in love with a guy, a native of Degania—which is to say, a demigod—who was three years older than I was. My conviction that I would definitely live in Degania when I grew up was now complete, because I fully planned to marry the demigod and settle with him there. He and I became friends, and while it took me five full years to accept that he would never want to be anything other than friends, for those few years—between the ages of fourteen and nineteen—my visits to Degania were much more frequent.

When I would arrive at Odi and Havah's apartment, the first thing I would do is sit myself by the window with a huge stack of back issues of Degania's weekly newsletter, which Odi and Havah kept in a basket, and I would read them all cover to cover. I think I had been doing that since I was about ten. The newsletter was a pamphlet of ten to twenty pages made entirely for internal distribution, which featured updates about the different agricultural, industrial, and communal operations of the kibbutz, musings about current events, anecdotes about the kibbutz's children, sometimes debates between members over social or administrative issues, good wishes for members' birthdays or weddings or graduations, lost and found, and things like that. By no means was it fascinating reading material for a teenage girl, but I was riveted by those newsletters because they appeared to me as windows—albeit opaque windows—into a place in which everyone knew one another intimately and to which everyone *belonged* in ways I could not even imagine. I wanted to know everything about this place, about these people, about their lives. I wanted to understand the special code that made them the enviable, unattainable thing that they were in my mind.

Years passed, and Degania stayed behind as a sweet childhood memory. I went to university and immersed myself in the study of another community with its own unique ideology and lifestyle, which was likewise unwelcoming to strangers and whose codes are notoriously difficult to crack—the Jewish rabbis of late antiquity. During my twenties, I also began to realize that the history of Israel was much more complicated than what I had learned in school, read in books in my childhood and youth, and heard about in songs. I found out that the land into which the first Zionists came was not empty but inhabited by another people that has been attached to it for many centuries, and I found out that what for the Israelis was a triumph and a dream come true was for the other people a devastating calamity. I learned that the residents of Palestinian villages did not all "leave" during the war in 1948, as we were told, but that some of them were forcefully banished, and some were killed in cold blood. I learned about the daily humiliation and occasional violence that the Palestinians suffered under Israel's military regime, and I have seen with my own eyes what atrocities are being committed toward the Palestinians in the West Bank, primarily by Jewish settlers but sometimes also by the Israeli army. It was striking to realize just how much I

didn't know for the first two decades of my life about the place where I lived—and once I did know, I did not quite know what to do next. How can you live in this place while knowing that the revival and redemption of one people, whom you happen to be part of, is the tragedy of the other people? And how can you hope for a solution when you know just how much suspicion, hatred, and trauma exist on both sides—and when both sides, with very few exceptions, refuse to listen to the other side's story?

Eventually life took me away from Israel, first to study, then to work, finally to settle. Not living in Israel was the right decision for me, but I cannot deny that I lost something meaningful when I decided not to live in Israel. I lost the feeling that I was part of something grand, something beautiful, something noble, in which I, personally, can and should play a significant role; that I am a link in a chain of a heroic effort, a two-century-long effort, to build a future-facing Hebrew culture on the foundations of a past-facing tradition; and that I am the bearer of a story, a story that I am eager to tell and am capable of telling. Avraham Balaban, who grew up in kibbutz Hulda and later immigrated to the United States and worked as a faculty member at the University of Florida, wrote the following words about leaving his kibbutz, which also speak to my feelings toward Israel:

> A child once walked between the houses, spoke to birds, kicked the stone that was on the ground and jumped so as to reach the branch that grew above the path. What sorrow. I did not share in all the joys of this place, but all of its dreams were my dreams. These dreams had times and seasons and places of assembly, they had the image of singing and the image of dancing and the image of an essay in the local newsletter, and life after them is a dreamless life, life upon the broken-pieces-of-a-dream.[2]

I was not naïve or nostalgic, and I knew quite well that the Israel that I was giving up on existed primarily in my imagination and in the stories that I grew up with. But these stories were precious to me, and I knew that in America they would resonate with nothing and no one. Most Americans I knew tended to view Israel in Manichean terms, either idealizing it and seeing it as beyond reproach or considering it the world's ultimate villain, such that their own virtue grows exponentially the more they condemn it. I stayed away from any and every conversation about Israel, announcing frequently that my interest in and knowledge of Jewish history ends in the year 1000. But secretly, I continued to read rather frantically about the history of Zionism and of Israel, trying to better understand the infinite complications of the place where I grew up. In particular, I devoured books and articles about the kibbutz, which fascinated me more and more the more I learned of its multiple facets and the very different experiences of those who lived in it or in relation to it. The kibbutz, I found out, was both heaven and hell, both a glorious success and a crushing failure, both all that was

good about Israel and all that was bad about it. Its inherent contradictions intrigued me and drew me in time and again.

The kibbutz would have probably remained a private side interest if it were not for the constant encouragement of Cathy Gere and Hildie Kraus, who were always eager to hear my anecdotes and tidbits about the kibbutz and suggested that I write a book about it. I dismissed the idea offhand. Hundreds of books have been written about the kibbutz, I told them, by people far more qualified than I am. There's nothing new or original for me to add. And just the thought of trying to publish and market such a book—identifying its potential audiences and maneuvering so as not to upset any of them (or the contrary, upsetting them so that the book would get attention)—was enough to make my stomach hurt. But I discovered, to my surprise, that I had a real urge to weave all the pieces that I had assembled over the years into a written tapestry and to craft a story that would neither hide the cracks and dissonances and pain and injustice nor revel in them. I wanted to tell the story of the kibbutz without a bottom line, without a verdict, but with as much care as possible. This was a labor of love and also a labor of heartache, which I could only complete when I liberated myself of concern for the book's publication prospects. If I am the only one who ever reads it, I decided, so be it. *We were always telling ourselves our story.*

This book was almost complete in the beginning of October 2023. On October 7, it was still dark outside when I woke up and automatically reached for my phone to check the news. Not the healthiest habit, I know; I used to justify it to my husband by explaining that I need to check daily that "nothing terrible happened in Israel." That morning I realized through my still half-closed eyes that something terrible had happened. Hamas terrorists launched coordinated attacks on the towns and villages near Gaza, killing over a thousand men, women, and children, burning down houses with people in them, raping and torturing their victims, and taking several hundred hostages. The first places to be ravaged were the kibbutzim near Gaza: Be'eri, Nahal Oz, Nirim, Kfar Aza. Rockets were fired throughout the country. The IDF responded by air raiding and bombing Gaza. There was a war.

I frantically started texting my people: my sister, my brother, my friends. As I was corresponding with them, I was overcome by feelings of profound guilt, guilt that is familiar to many Israeli expatriates. This is guilt over the fact that they are there, holding down the fort, risking their lives just by virtue of living there, sending their kids to the army—and I have opted for a comfortable life far away where such prices would never be demanded of me. The notion with which I was raised—that not living in Israel is a form of betrayal—is still hardwired into my brain. But that guilt was also a way of hindering other, more painful emotions—overwhelming sadness, fear for my loved ones, dread of what Israel's response would be and what the next chapter would be in the horrible, bloody conflict in which the Israelis and the Palestinians have been trapped for decades. Through the mists of gut-wrenching sorrow, I was reminded of a song from my childhood—

which like many songs I grew up with was a love song to the land—but this was a rather somber and sad one:

A land that devours those who live in it,
That flows with milk and honey and azure,
At times it, too, steals
The poor man's lamb.
A land whose clods of dirt are sweet,
And whose shores are as salty as tears,
And those who love it have given it
Everything they had to give.[3]

The war is still ongoing as these words are written, and the sadness and devastation is too great for me to say anything of substance about it. It brings to the fore the full gamut of my complicated feelings toward Israel, alongside a sense of loneliness, as I try to hold the tremendous suffering on both sides in my mind and heart, not dismissing the horror on one end because the horror on the other end is greater. Both sides, I know, think of themselves as the poor man's lamb, and in many ways they both are.

It is impossible to tell the story of the kibbutz without telling, directly and indirectly, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The kibbutz was an idea that was to materialize, by definition, here on earth—that is, on a concrete plot of land—and so the questions of ownership over the land, from whom (and how) the land was acquired, who lived there before, and whether and how those who lived there before were made to disappear, were there from the very first day. More often than not, the kibbutzim did not want to think about these questions—in the same way that most Israelis today do not want to think about them. Writing this book was a way for me to approach the willful ignorance, the blind spots, and the cognitive dissonance with a measured combination of criticism and compassion, while also not belittling the genuine trauma and existential dread that underlies them then and now. The events of the recent months are not discussed in this book, but they have doubtlessly colored the background against which the story unfolds.

1

The Long Furrow

1909–1919

Perhaps
None of this ever happened.
Perhaps
I never rose at dawn to the garden,
To till it with the sweat of my brow.
Never
In long, scorching days of heat
From the top of a wagon filled with sheaves
Did I lift my voice in song.
Never was I purified
In the serenity of azure and innocence
Of my Kinneret… Oh, my Kinneret,
Were you real, or was I only dreaming?[4]

Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931) wrote the poem "Perhaps" in 1927 in a rooftop apartment in Tel Aviv, very far from the Jordan Valley and from the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), which the poem longingly describes. Bedridden, destitute, and lonely, despite already being a well-published and beloved poet, Rachel questioned whether her happy days in Degania, from which she was banished due to the tuberculosis of which she was now dying, ever really happened.

Rachel's tragic story is an iconic one in Zionist Israeli lore. Born in Russia in 1890 to a well-off bourgeois Jewish family, Rachel grew up playing the piano and taking drawing lessons. In 1909, she and her sister Shoshana were on their way to study art and philosophy in Italy when they spontaneously decided to make a stop in Palestine. They fell in love with the rough, unrefined, and demanding land,

and they stayed. In 1911, Rachel decided that merely residing in the old-new homeland was not enough: she yearned for unmediated contact with the earth itself, with the soil and the sun and the rocks. For her, as for many young Jews of her generation, only upon return to those elemental substances of life could one return to oneself. To receive proper agricultural training, she joined the Women's Farm, which had just opened near the Kinneret, later describing the experience as both brutal and exhilarating:

> At the break of dawn, we began to work. There were fourteen of us. Calloused, bare feet. Tan, bruised. Determined faces, burning hearts [...] Our hoes were swinging ceaselessly. For a brief moment you pause, wipe the sweat off your forehead with the end of your headscarf, glance lovingly at the sea. How good it is! Azure, unspeakable azure, bringing peace, remedy for the soul. [...] The more meager the meals, the more the sounds of youth were joyful. We dreaded comfort. We longed for sacrifice, for torture, for the prisoner's bonds, with which we would exaltingly sanctify the name of the homeland [...] More than one of us was shivering with malaria on her makeshift bed. But not for a moment were any of us devoid of a sense of profound gratitude. As we were working, our souls were rising to the heavens.[5]

Rachel was so taken with fieldwork that she decided to go to France and study agronomy at Université de Toulouse. Her timing was bad. World War I broke out when she was in Europe, and as a Russian citizen she could not go back to Palestine, which was under Ottoman rule. When she eventually returned to Palestine in 1919 and joined Degania, not far from Kinneret Farm, she already had a bad case of tuberculosis that she picked up during her many wanderings and her work with refugees. Degania's members were terrified that she might infect them or their children. After a few months she was forced to leave—and only to write, until her very premature death in 1931, about the most wonderful time in her life, wondering if she had made it all up.

"Perhaps," like all of Rachel's poems (which she published unassumingly, only under her first name), is a very personal, lyrical poem. It is not about nation, sacrifice, heroism, or conquest; nor it is about community, equality, or a better and more just world—all the things that the kibbutz movement so proudly stood for. It is about one young woman's dream of a life lived fully, sensually, and authentically, a dream that quickly crashed on the cliffs of difficult personal and geopolitical circumstances and turned into a precious but fragile memory. As such, Rachel's poem captures in a few gentle brushstrokes the quest of so many of the men and women who set out on the adventure that would come to be known as "the kibbutz" in the beginning of the twentieth century. The overwhelming majority of them would not remain in the kibbutz or even in Palestine, but that dream, whether it would turn into a reality—for all the tedium and drudgery that

reality entails—or remain a distant, fading memory, will define the lives of those who dreamed it forever.

❖

My family's trips to Degania are etched in my memory. Leaving our hometown of Jerusalem early in the morning, we would head east toward the Judean Desert and the Dead Sea. The twists and turns descending from mountainous Jerusalem to the lowest point in the world—430 meters below sea level and nearly 1,200 meters below Jerusalem—were my nightmare, and I usually spent them lying in the fetal position on the back seat of the car, battling motion sickness. When I would spot the first palm trees in the distance, I knew we were approaching Jericho and the tortuous part of the journey was over; we were now turning north, into the Jordan Valley. Glued to window, I would watch impatiently as the yellow-brown desert landscape gradually became greener until the magical moment when a blue glimmer would appear fleetingly on the right side before quickly disappearing again. "It's the Kinneret!" I would shout, ecstatic. In my arid country where water was an ever-present concern, our one and only sweet-water lake had an enchanting, almost divine presence. And the sparkling sight of the Kinneret meant that we were almost there, in Degania, the mother of the kibbutz movement, the paradise of my childhood. More than anything, I remember that moment of stepping out of the car (and later, when I was older and going there by myself, off the bus), smelling the intoxicating mixture of cut grass and manure, and thinking, *damn, it is so hot*.

The story of the kibbutz begins about 120 years ago in the Jordan Valley, by the shore of the Kinneret, and the memories shared by the first people who made it their story generally begin with the same experience I described: enchantment and ecstasy amid sizzling, blistering heat. Heat, however, was the name of the game in the first decade of the twentieth century. "The time itself was like a furnace, and the generation was consumed by this flame," wrote Yitzhak Tabenkin (1888–1971), the person who to a great extent turned the kibbutz from an experiment into an institution. "Values were burned, worlds and ideals were burned. People were in a perpetual state of conflagration."[6]

Those people who were in a perpetual state of conflagration—Tabenkin and his fellows—were part of a new movement, miniscule in size but epic in its self-perception; they were Jewish revolutionaries seeking a complete and all-encompassing transformation of the very existence of the Jewish people. The furnace in which their consciousness was set on fire was the failed Russian Revolution of 1905 and its lofty vision of the liberation of the masses, but the mold in which this consciousness was cast was fervent Jewish nationalism and a sense of a distinct and uncompromising ethnic and cultural identity. As Berl Katznelson (1887–1944), one of the most influential leaders of the Labor movement, put it, "The momentous waves of the world engulfed us, the wine of the revolution

intoxicated us, in its armies we fought, in its whirlwinds we were tossed, in its defeat we were stricken. And throughout all that, we were few among the many, and no storm could uproot us from the ground of our Israelite existence."[7]

Those revolutionaries were Zionists, but they were sick of the well-to-do Zionist salons and poetry readings and endless theoretical discussions that were prevalent among Jews in European cities back then. They decided not only to meet in clubs and to write op-eds full of exclamation points but to try to live out their vision in the Jews' mythical homeland, Palestine. Those who set sail to Palestine during those years, between 1904 and 1914, later became known as the Second Aliyah. *Aliyah* literally means "ascent." Traditionally, one does not immigrate to Israel/Palestine but rather "ascends," and to leave the country is to "descend." About 35,000 Jews "ascended" to Palestine during the ten years of the Second Aliyah. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that more than fifty percent—and some say as many as ninety percent—of those 35,000 ended up "descending," mostly back to Europe or to the United States.

Why "the *Second* Aliyah"? This term is used to distinguish those who immigrated to Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century from the previous wave of immigrants who came in the 1880s and 1890s and received the name "the First Aliyah." The First Aliyah marks the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine that was guided by Zionist ideology rather than by religious sentiment. This ideology championed the return of Jews to Zion as farmers and workers, as land-owning and self-asserting people who do not live at the pleasure of foreign rulers and in constant fear of antisemitic attacks. But even though the Second Aliyah was to some extent inspired by the First Aliyah, the two were very different. The immigrants of the First Aliyah came primarily as families, with two and sometimes three generations arriving together. For the most part they were still attached to the lifestyles and values of Jews in Eastern Europe, both in terms of their strong religious and traditional commitments and in terms of their overall bourgeois tendencies. Once they became landowners, they mostly did not work themselves but paid the Palestinian Arabs to work in the vineyards and orchards they proudly cultivated. The Second Aliyah, in contrast, consisted almost exclusively of very young and unmarried people, aged between seventeen and twenty-five, who left behind not only their families but the entire world of the European Jewish tradition and made the journey to Palestine on their own. They were (mostly) staunchly secular, passionately socialist, and their vision of immigration to Palestine was a vision of rebirth. One was to baptize oneself in the new land, as it were, and to re-emerge as a new human being.

When the newcomers of the Second Aliyah completed the long boat journey to Palestine, they arrived in the port town of Jaffa, and within a day or two, in search of work, they made their way to one of the *moshavot* (plural of *moshavah*), Jewish settlements established by their predecessors of the First Aliyah. Those predecessors struck them as well-to-do estate owners who made a profit off the hard labor of others. The estate owners, for their part, did not offer the warmest

of welcomes to those young idealists who lacked any experience in manual or agricultural labor—really, any experience in any labor for that matter—but nonetheless demanded to be hired. They preferred to keep employing the local Arab Palestinians who were much more capable and worked for much lower wages than the Jewish newcomers expected. The Second Aliyah folks—later to be known as *halutzim*, "pioneers"—had not much choice but to wander from place to place in search of work, food, and a place to sleep. Sometimes they stayed in one place for a few months, sometimes only for a few days. Barefoot, famished, lonely, and downtrodden, some of the newcomers began to experiment with communal living arrangements.

Communes as such were hardly a novel idea. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were dozens—if not hundreds—of communes in Russia, and there were also multiple communes (sometimes also regarded as "utopian communities") in the United States and in Western Europe. Many of the communes in Russia were based on *narodnik* principles (from *narod,* people or folk), which propagated the notion of a grassroots socialist revolution that would gradually emerge from voluntary associations of farmers. The *narodniks* sought to create independent agrarian cooperatives in the countryside in which all members shared their harvests and worked collectively to provide for all members' needs. For many young Russian Jews, an anti-tsarist sentiment with an anarchic tint to it, combined with Tolstoian idealism that preached a return to the basics, simple living, and liberation from the traps of comfort and luxury, led to an enthusiastic adoption of the communal model—and Palestine seemed like the place where this model could materialize.

At the same time, for the immigrants of the Second Aliyah the idea of the commune was also a practical one, a way to mitigate not only impoverishment but also despair and solitude. Those newcomers to Palestine, willfully torn from everything and everyone they knew, needed to find a way to eat on the many days when they could not find work; they needed someone to care for them when they fell ill, which was often; and they needed a friendly hand and voice to comfort them when homesickness and hopelessness engulfed them. Rooming together in groups of three or four or five and sharing whatever meager provisions one had with others made sense, as did the model that developed soon thereafter of traveling workers' communes, which moved from one place to the next, going wherever there was work to be found. But the arrangement that was born of necessity quickly became saturated with ideology; settling down in one place and establishing a family home came to be viewed as the first step on the way to abandonment of the revolutionary mindset. The revolutionary worker was encouraged to be on the move constantly, to chart out new territories, to remain unattached to land and comforts, to shun all the temptations of permanence and property. And so, the absence of family, the destitution, and the detachment that were sources of despair for the individual became the raison d'être of the commune.

Before long the newcomers left the established Jewish settlements behind and headed north to the Galilee. The transition from the *moshavot*, located in the central plains of Palestine, to the mountainous Galilee was also a transition from one kind of agricultural work to a very different kind of work: from working in orchards, groves, and vineyards, where everything is nicely arranged in rows and columns, to making the very first furrows in a ground that was never plowed before—hard, stubborn, unforgiving ground. For the pioneers of the Second Aliyah, the Galilee was the frontier. There, they genuinely got to be *the first*.

The different communes that made their way to the Galilee traveled between various farmyards, each time working with a different landowner or farm manager (of the few who were around), but one farmyard in particular left its mark on the history of the kibbutz. This is Kinneret Farm, which was established in 1908 by the Palestinian Office of the World Zionist Organization as a training farm for Jewish agricultural workers. Kinneret Farm is the place that the poet Rachel so longed for about twenty years later, and it is the place where pretty much every single person who came to take a leading position in the Zionist movement in Palestine—whether as a politician or as an intellectual—spent a good amount of time. Kinneret Farm is also the place most identified with Aaron David Gordon, the so-called prophet of the Labor Movement, who immigrated to Palestine at the age of forty-eight—a conspicuous aberration among the children of the Second Aliyah—and became the spiritual father of the Galilean workers. Gordon's visions of a return to nature as a return to oneself and of agricultural work as a path toward personal redemption and liberation are often viewed as the alternative religion that the pioneers, who abandoned traditional Judaism with contempt, collectively embraced. After his death in 1922, Gordon's teachings would stand at the core of the youth movement that carried his name, *Gordonia*, which would seek out Jewish youth in Eastern Europe in order to prepare them for kibbutz life in Palestine.

About twenty percent of the immigrants of the Second Aliyah were women. Like their male counterparts, these women were driven by socialist ideology, Zionist convictions, and a deep quest for self-invention and rebirth. "Two ideas brought me to Palestine," wrote Sarah Malkin, who arrived at Jaffa in 1905, "[First,] that the essence of Zionism is to live in Palestine and [second,] that every person in Palestine must till the ground, work, and create."[8] For the women of the Second Aliyah, however, this quest also entailed another component, namely, liberation from traditional gender roles, both those imposed on Jewish women by the stringent patriarchal structure of the Jewish family and those assigned by well-to-do European bourgeoisie. These women believed that such liberation was possible, since the Zionist-socialist clubs in Eastern Europe often debated "the question of the woman" and discussed the importance of freeing women from the oppressive

conditions under which they were living. The anarchic and anti-institutional penchant of these organizations, with their emphasis on individual freedom and voluntary association, made them especially appealing to women who did not wish to comply with the expectations of wifehood and motherhood.

The very decision to leave one's parents' home as a young, single woman and to travel alone—or at most with a sibling or another female friend—to a distant and desolate country so as not to return was in itself a dramatic defiance of gender expectations. A popular song from those days, written in the form of a dialogue between mother and daughter, captured the tenacity of those young Zionist women who were willing to break their parents' hearts to pursue their dream:

Tell me, my girl,
Tell me, my sweetheart,
How can you go, how can you go
To the Land of Israel?
A stormy and enormous sea,
Ships wrecked in its waters,
How can you go, how can you go
To the Land of Israel?

Oh, my mother, my heart is like the sea,
It is storming, it is yearning to go there,
Only, only to the Land of Israel!

Tell me, my girl,
Tell me, my sweetheart,
How can you go, how can you go
To the Land of Israel?
The sun there in the sky is hot
Sweat pours like buckets,
How can you go, how can you go
To the Land of Israel?

Oh, my mother, my heart is so hot,
It is burning, it is drawn to go there,
Only, only to the Land of Israel![9]

When the women of the Second Aliyah arrived in Palestine, they encountered all the physical and emotional difficulties that the men encountered with an added dimension: no one took them seriously, including their male peers. These women were eager to work in the fields and in the groves and orchards, but the established farmers (with very few exceptions) found it laughable that women would take on agricultural work. Some of them found it downright sacrilegious; Sarah Malkin

related how after she was fortunate enough to work for three days picking leeks in one of the *moshavot*, a child of one of the families died, and the local rabbi determined that this was because of the sin of the *russishe tzioniskta* ("the Russian Zionist") who had been working with men in the fields.[10] She was immediately fired. Women could fairly easily find household work in the *moshavot*—cooking, cleaning, sewing, and so on—but those were exactly the jobs they did *not* want, although many of them had to take such jobs to make ends meet.

Even more painful, however, was the derision and dismissiveness of the Second Aliyah men, who ostensibly shared the same ideology and the same desperate desire for agricultural work. Not only did the men assume that the women were incapable of such work, but they also complained that the women who were seeking such work were compromising the men's chances of getting hired. When communes began to form, some communes hired women to provide housekeeping services, but they did not regard them as full commune members. The memories of Second Aliyah women, even and especially those who rose to prominent leadership positions in years to come, are rife with resentment and hurt as they look back at their first years in Palestine. The utter joy they felt when they had a chance to work in the fields or orchards—which happened only when they encountered a more open-minded farm owner or when there was a dire need for seasonal workers—was tempered by the pain of rejection and the ridicule they otherwise dealt with nearly every day. Nothing compared, apparently, to filling baskets with freshly picked oranges, pruning grapevines, and in one especially progressive farm in the Galilee, even ploughing with a pair of oxen.

Only in 1911 did women begin to organize—hesitantly, unsurely—in an attempt to find their path toward agricultural work. A major step toward this purpose was Hanna Meisel's initiative to start the Women's Farm, an agricultural training program at Kinneret Farm. Meisel, who held a doctorate in agronomy, worked tirelessly to convince both the Zionist offices in Palestine and wealthy Jewish donors in Germany that Jewish women had to learn fundamental agricultural skills. Her emphasis, however, was that such skills were needed so that Jewish women could excel in their roles as farmers' wives and mothers. "The woman sets the tone for the entire house," Meisel wrote. "If we wish to raise generations that are true to our people, we need good Hebrew mothers [...] and we will not be able to achieve our goal if the mother is not naturally and genuinely attached to her village, her barnyard, and her garden."[11] She pointed to the traditional gendered division of labor in countryside households, where the men work in extensive field cultivation while the women are in charge of supplying the family's needs by growing vegetables, milking cows, and keeping a chicken coop. The Women's Farm trained women strictly for the latter endeavors (which, make no mistake, are physically exerting and by no means simple to master). But at least some of the women insisted that they could do more—and that they deserved more. In a letter from 1912 signed "a group of [female] workers" (*po'alot*), a few women of the Women's Farm spoke their mind:

> We, the [female] workers, like the [male] workers, aspire first and foremost to heal our spirit and body through work and to attain thereby the same freedom, beauty, and wholeness of the soul [...] We are not merely fodder for manufacturing the peasant class in our country [...] The mere act of sailing on the Great Sea and residing on its eastern shore without a fundamental change to our way of life does not take us out of a state of exile.[12]

It would be lovely if we could say that the kibbutz, the seeds for which first sprouted at Kinneret Farm, offered women ways to channel their passion, their enthusiasm, and their desire to be treated as equals toward productive and satisfying lives. It certainly did so for some of them, especially those who were uniquely persistent and self-asserting. But on the whole, the grievances expressed in this letter never quite went away, and the questions of women's role and of gender expectations in communal living arrangements plagued the kibbutz throughout its history.

The Women's Farm, 1912. Sarah Malkin is on the far left of the center row; Hanna Meisel is third from the left in the center row.

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If Kinneret Farm is the mythical mothership of the kibbutz movement, then the first vessel that it launched—the one after which the idea of the kibbutz was modeled—is Degania. As befits a socialist paragon, the story of Degania's birth begins with a labor conflict and a strike.

The manager of Kinneret Farm was an experienced agronomist by the name of Moshe Berman, an immigrant of the First Aliyah of whom the new workers were quite suspicious from the start. Some of them encountered him when he was still running agricultural operations in the *moshavot* and would never hire them. While things at Kinneret Farm looked promising in the beginning—Berman was truly appreciative of the workers' enthusiasm and commitment, and they grew to respect his expertise and broad knowledge—conflicts ensued before too long. The workers expected to be treated as equals, to be consulted and to have a say in budgetary and administrative decisions. Berman, on the other hand, considered himself the sole authority on all matters. Things came to a boiling point one day in 1909. One of the workers fell ill and was transferred to the Scottish Hospital in Tiberias. Later that afternoon, the message arrived that he had died. The workers on the farm asked Berman for two wagons and two mules so that they could go to Tiberias and hold a funeral for him. Berman was willing to give them only one mule and one wagon. The workers rebuffed Berman's half-gesture: they walked all the way to Tiberias (about ten kilometers) to attend the funeral, and upon their return, they declared a strike.

Arthur Ruppin, the head of the Palestinian Office who was the man behind the idea of Kinneret Farm to begin with, went into crisis management mode. After lengthy conversations with Berman and the workers, he proposed a resolution: the farm would be divided in two. Half of it would be managed by Berman and half of it by the workers themselves. This did resolve the conflict, at least for a while, but Ruppin did not stop there. He turned to a few of the hardline organizers of the strike, who by that point had left Kinneret Farm altogether and moved back south to Hadera, one of the *moshavot*; they came to be known alternately as "the Hadera Commune" or "the Romny Commune" after the town in Ukraine from which a number of them came. The Hadera Commune consisted of ten men and two women, Miriam Ostrowsky and Sarah Malkin, who were initially hired as housekeepers but later became commune members.

Ruppin told the Hadera Commune that if they were truly serious about this self-management business, he could offer them some lands east of the Jordan River by the Arab village of Umm Juni (about two kilometers southeast of Kinneret Farm), which the Jewish Colonization Association acquired back in 1904. They will have no boss and no supervisor; all will be done by them and for them. Were they interested? The Hadera Commune decided to try it out for one year. They settled near Umm Juni, which they renamed Degania after the five strains of grain that grow there (*dagan* means grain in Hebrew).

At the end of the first year, which was surprisingly successful in terms of productivity and profit, a decision had to be made: to stay or to move on? Some of the members were adamant that the group had to move on in the spirit of perpetual movement and perpetual new beginnings. They were concerned about becoming *koulaks*, the Russian term for a peasant who owns land and prioritizes his own estate rather than his fellow peasants and the people as whole. Some

members of the group argued that now, having mastered the work and proven to the world that having workers manage a farm by themselves is possible, their job there was done; they should leave the place in the hands of others and go somewhere else to chart out new possibilities and conquer new challenges. But the informal leader of the group, Yosef Bussel, vehemently insisted that the commune must stay put. Experiments, he said, are a dime a dozen; the challenge is not to show what can be done but to live as one thinks one ought to live—in this case, communally and self-sustainably, without any reliance on the work of others, and with full commitment to the group in every aspect of life. Degania ought to be a long-term project, not a beginning for beginning's sake. The argument was heated and lasted for many hours until Tanchum Tanpilov, probably the quietest member of the commune, suddenly knocked down a chair. "We will stay here," he said.[13]

The Hadera Commune. Standing (left to right): Yosef Baratz, Tanchum Tanpilov, Sarah Malkin, and Haim Tzadikov. Sitting (left to right): Miriam Ostrowsky (Baratz), Israel Bloch, Yosef Bussel, Yosef Elkin, and Zvi Yehudah.

In December 1911, the members of the Commune signed a contract with the Palestinian Office that defined the terms of their residence in Degania. One clause was added to the contract at the request of the workers themselves: that the land would never be their own. So as never to own the means of production, so that they would never think of their own well-being and become corrupt and lacking

in revolutionary consciousness, the members of Degania would be tenants, not landowners. The land belonged to the nation, and the members of Degania would lease it—nothing more. For years to come, the notion that direct ownership of land must be avoided became a sacred principle of the kibbutz movement. Even kibbutzim that initially did buy land using private funds made a point, after a few years, of ceremoniously delivering their lands to the Jewish National Foundation.

In 1911, however, the word *kibbutz* was not yet invented (at least not to describe the model of communal settlement presented in Degania). The founders and members of Degania, which continued to grow to about thirty-five members over the next two years, referred to it as *kvutzah*, literally, "group." The group was to be, by definition, intimate and closely knit, and Degania maintained intimacy as an ideology and continued to refer to itself as kvutzah even when it had as many as four hundred members. The kvutzah was founded on six core values:

1. Work is the foundation upon which each person must build their life.
2. Each person shall contribute according to their abilities and receive according to their needs.
3. All labors, pleasant and unpleasant, are equal in value.
4. One must do work on one's own. No exploitation of others and no leisure at the expense of the collective are allowed.
5. The Group as a whole shall offer mutual support for all members, in all areas of life, throughout the members' entire lives.
6. All material goods belong to all members, and no property is recognized as private.[14]

A community guided by these principles, Degania's founders believed, will present maximum individual freedom. It shall have no exploiters and exploited, wealthy and poor. A community such as this will lift human dignity up and unleash creative and spiritual energy that no individual can generate on their own.

Degania then began its great adventure: making a life rather than merely arguing an idea. They called it "the long furrow." This meant a long-term commitment to a place and to a community, seeing it throughout its highs and lows, and extracting the substance of one's loftiest dreams from the mundane workings of everyday life. This may not sound thrilling, but it was, in many ways, the most audacious and inspired course of action imaginable back then. The poet Rachel, once again, said it in a few lines that captured this state of mind beautifully:

Here on earth—not in the clouds, above—
Upon the near earth, the mother;
To be saddened by its sadness and to revel in its meager revelry,
Which knows to comfort you so.
Not tomorrow's mists—today that is held at hand—

The firm, warm, solid today;
To imbibe this day, the short, the one,
Upon our earth right here.[15]

Degania's founders in Umm Juni, 1910.

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From the outset, Degania set out to achieve two goals that were not necessarily fully compatible with one another: first, to become a self-sustaining and ultimately profitable farm, and second, to maintain absolute equality and communality among its members in all matters, great and small. The former goal required efficiency, tenacity, frugality, and productivity above all; the latter goal required compromises, patience, balancing of different needs and different personalities, and endless conversations. The members worked during the day, and group conversations were held in the evening and night hours. The code name for the conversation in those early years was "the table" because all members sat around a table and every single decision had to be made collectively and unanimously: who will work where; who will work with which mule; which mule will work with which mule; who will assemble figs for breakfast and who will turn the figs into jam; and even when all this was done, as one member recalled, "There were still very important matters that remained unresolved and required special consideration, at times talking until morning."[16]

Those endless conversations, combined with the difficult living conditions, the meager food (which consisted primarily of lentils, raw onion, and radishes), and the exerting physical labor, were as exhausting and as trying as they sound. The level of intimacy among the members of the group and the unrelenting perseverance and resilience that communal living required made it a social and emotional pressure cooker. Aliza Shidlowski (1895–1983), who came to Degania in 1913, described those ordeals:

> Since life was based in its entirety on camaraderie, on one's capability for forming friendly relations, and on mutual compatibility—all this caused constant tension between one person and another [...] Every slight indication of incompatibility or misunderstanding between any two individuals brought about stress and impacted the life of the group as a whole. People were walking around in great distress. As all of life depended on relations of affection and friendship, even the most trivial conflicts raised doubts as to whether one would be able to live here and presented the community with the question of whether this person was a good fit. Everything was extremely subjective because the group was so small, and its balance was easily thrown off.[17]

Before too long, communal life was presented with yet another challenge, namely, marriage and children. In June 1912, two of Degania's founding members, Yosef Baratz and Miriam Ostrowsky, celebrated their wedding, which doubled as a celebration of Degania's first harvest and of the new permanent houses (instead of the temporary shacks in which they lived until that point). Exuberant dancing followed the ceremony, but at 2 a.m. the bride took her leave and went to milk the cows. Miriam describes the preparations for the wedding, the burden of which fell on her and on Degania's other female member, Sarah Malkin:

> Guests were invited from the entire country, and even though the journey from Tel Aviv and Jaffa lasted two full days, many did come. Degania's people wore their finest clothes. I cooked the wedding meal and Sarah Malkin helped me. The time of the ceremony was near, my white dress was ready, and I hadn't even had time to bathe in the water of the Kinneret [...] This was a national wedding of sorts, which was celebrated with extraordinary joy. I felt the weight of great responsibility, responsibility toward the collective, that is.[18]

In 1913, Miriam and Yosef's first son, Gideon, was born. His birth brought great joy to the group, and he was immediately celebrated collectively as "Degania's first child." Miriam mentions that she "had no objection to this," even when random group members would decide to wake the child from his sleep at 10 p.m. because they wanted to show him off to a guest.[19] Nevertheless, the group

members quickly realized that they did not quite think of children and families when they crafted their idealized vision of communality and equality. In a community where productive work for the collective's benefit was the most decisive condition for membership, who is to care for the children (considering that childcare was *not* considered productive work)? If the child's mother is to do the caretaking, is her ability to contribute to the group compromised because she now cares for an infant? How is she to balance motherhood and work life?

Miriam was determined to prove that she could do both. "I continued my life exactly as it had been before and overcame all the difficulties. I would rise at 3 a.m. to work and never stopped until 10 p.m.," she wrote.[20] She would take Gideon with her and place him on a pile of straw in the cowshed. Even so, the group determined that Miriam would only get two-thirds of the allowance given to each member, since some of her time was spent caring for the baby. When Yosef and Miriam's daughter was born in 1915, Miriam wanted to bring both children to the cowshed with her, but the group resisted. If you are that serious about working with the cows, they told Miriam, you should take a professional course in cattle husbandry. Miriam consented and spent nine months away from home and away from her two children. Years later she wrote, "It was the most difficult time in my life." [21]

Shmuel Dayan, one of Degania's most influential members, was worried. He felt that the group did not know how to deal with this children's business and that they had neither the material resources nor the organizational structures to support families. He proposed that the group members make a pact not to get married for at least five years, and his proposal was accepted. Around that time a beautiful and troubled young woman, Devorah Zatolowsky, arrived in Degania. The members deemed her unsuitable for the group: she was too dainty, too bookish, too individualistic, and not fit for hard work. Shmuel Dayan, however, fell in love with her. In September 1914 he broke the pact that he himself initiated and married Devorah, and in May 1915 their son Moshe was born (the same Moshe Dayan who would grow up to be Israel's military chief of staff and secretary of defense).

When Moshe Dayan was born, the group decided that his mother, Devorah, should care for both her own child and for Miriam Baratz's child so that at least one mother would be entirely free to work. This arrangement only lasted several weeks before Devorah rebelled. She wanted to be a mother to her own child, not a nanny to another woman's child, and Gideon Baratz went back to the cowshed. Further conflicts ensued when Devorah Dayan decided to start a kitchen of her own where she would cook for her own family. Tanchum Tanpilov had a fit. He threw the pots and the kerosene burner that Devorah claimed for herself out the window and told her in no equivocal terms that she and her son are to eat in the common dining hall like everyone else.

The conversation about principles of childrearing and parental duties could no longer be postponed. To whom do the commune's children belong, their

parents or the collective? And who is responsible for their care and upbringing? It was a heated conversation. Yosef Bussel, the informal leader, was adamant: if children are to be viewed as the charge of their biological parents alone, this is for all intents and purposes the end of the communal idea. The desire "to turn the child into private property [...] into the likeness of the mother and the father," he said, is tantamount to a rejection of the entire endeavor they were pursuing. "In all matters of our lives we shall have a commune but in the upbringing of children we shall not? [...] The children are collective property, and we should educate them collectively. We are climbing up a steep mountain, and we must climb it in one motion."[22]

The Dayans left Degania shortly thereafter and along with a few friends established Nahalal, the first workers' village (*moshav*) in Palestine. The workers' village offered a more moderate version of communal, labor-based habitation in which the members offer each other assistance and limited financial backing but no more. In the kvutzah, later to become the kibbutz, the elemental unit is the individual who willingly commits their life to the collective; in the moshav, the elemental unit is the family. Both Degania and Nahalal would serve as blueprints for these two types of villages for years to come.

When the pact was broken and more members of Degania started getting married and having children, the group began to form the arrangement that would become one of the hallmarks of the kibbutz—in time, its most contested and controversial hallmark—communal childcare. Put simply, so that mothers would be able to continue working and contributing to the group, someone else would have to care for their children. And so childcare became a shared responsibility with duties distributed among members—always women—in accordance with seasonal and administrative considerations. Once again, pioneering women in Palestine found themselves in the traditional gender roles that they so hoped to escape. Yosef Baratz, Miriam (Ostrowsky) Baratz's husband, put it plainly and solemnly in his memoir: "In the Land [of Israel], the [female] comrade hoped to create a new life for herself, to be a land worker like her friends, and here we are [...] her fate here is as her fate was there."[23]

Miriam Baratz herself, however, was uniquely adamant to mark her territory. She was eager to work with the cows, but one of the men was dispatched to that work while she was assigned housekeeping roles. She found an ingenious solution: if milking duty was set to begin at 3 a.m., Miriam made her way to the cowshed at 2 a.m. and started milking the cows so that the man dispatched to this work had nothing to do once he arrived. Her efforts were successful. The cowshed became her exclusive domain, and in fact, up until the 1950s cattle husbandry in Degania was the domain of women alone. Other women, who did not have Miriam Baratz's determination nor her status as a founding member, remained silently—but sometimes also vocally—resentful. In Yosef Haim Brenner's 1920 novel *Breakdown and Bereavement*, which incisively describes the more devastating and

heartbreaking experiences of the Second Aliyah, a character named Esther speaks with bitterness:

> The workers here acknowledge only the woman's right to be a cook…and she used to cook for the communes, too…this is the life of a dog…feeding forty people, each one with their own demands […] and then the complaints: The food is expensive! We're in deficit! Such food does not give us the strength to work! And one has to bring in water, wood—and no one brings them in, and no one takes anything out, and the food is late—and it's all the cook's fault! […] Oh, before coming here she thought that angels walk the ground here…she is not that naïve, but she'd hoped…and now—have you seen how the young workers here treat women? With what rudeness, with what dismissal…like a non-person…none of them reached out to her…none of them spoke to her like a friend…always dismissiveness, always jokes, banter…and now…now they mock her when she wants…wants some life for herself as well…[24]

The fictionalized words of "Esther," which resonate with actual memories, letters, and diaries from the time, are invoked here not so as to expose "the seedy underbelly of the kibbutz," as one friend of mine called it, nor so as to shatter the myth that pioneer women in Palestine enjoyed freedom and liberation beyond what most women of their time could imagine. Rather, these words offer a reminder that the grand and heroic human endeavor symbolized by Degania was exactly that: human. It manifested the human spirit at its most sublime—the quest for meaning, for justice, for creativity, for endurance—but it was always inevitably challenged by all the trials that humans encounter when they attempt to live with one another, intensified a hundredfold. Even in the earliest stages of this ostensibly classless society, there were people who felt like they were second- and third-class members; even in the days defined by selflessness and seeking the highest moral ground, people quietly asked, "But what about *me*?" The story of the kibbutz is, from its very beginning, a story of envisioning and even assuming humans at their very best while negotiating the realities of humans as they actually are.

Degania was never intended to be one of a kind. Its founding members intended from the start that whatever it was that they were creating, it was to be emulated and replicated by others. The intimacy of the group was disrupted over and over again by enthusiastic volunteers, curious visitors, and Zionist leaders and fundraisers who were seeking inspiration and who were eager to tell the world about this marvel. Before long, new replicas of Degania begin to form. Kinneret Farm turned from a training farm into a permanent group settlement in 1913; it was followed in 1915 by Ayelet HaShahar in the upper Galilee, in 1916 by Kefar

Gila'di in the Galilee's panhandle, and in 1920 by another group that settled in the area adjacent to Degania and named itself, prosaically, "Degania Bet" (the original Degania became Degania Aleph). But what started as a drip in the 1910s turned into a flood in the 1920s.

2

Strike, Hammer

1920–1929

There, in the valley between the mountains,
Pioneers are working.
Their arms are bare, their faces suntanned,
Come, hear what they're singing:
"Let us drain swamps and lakes,
Let us pave new roads,
Let us indeed build our land
Upon the golden sands!"[25]

No one knows who wrote the lullaby "There, in the Valley." Children born in the Jezreel Valley in the 1920s remember their parents singing this song to them to the melody of a famous Polish children's song known as *Jadą, jadą dzieci drogą* ("The Children are Riding, Riding along the Way"), but the Hebrew lyricist remains uncredited. It is perhaps only appropriate for a time and a place in which the ethos was that everything belongs to everyone collectively—even precious, intimate childhood memories. The Hebrew version replaced the children of the original Polish song (a brother and a sister leisurely riding in a wagon and looking at storks, frogs, and cows) with a picture taken straight out of a Soviet propaganda poster: muscular workers with bare arms and suntanned faces singing happily as they take on the ominous tasks of draining swamps and paving roads. For the pioneers who settled in Palestine in the early 1920s, this aesthetic of socialist realism was by no means incidental.

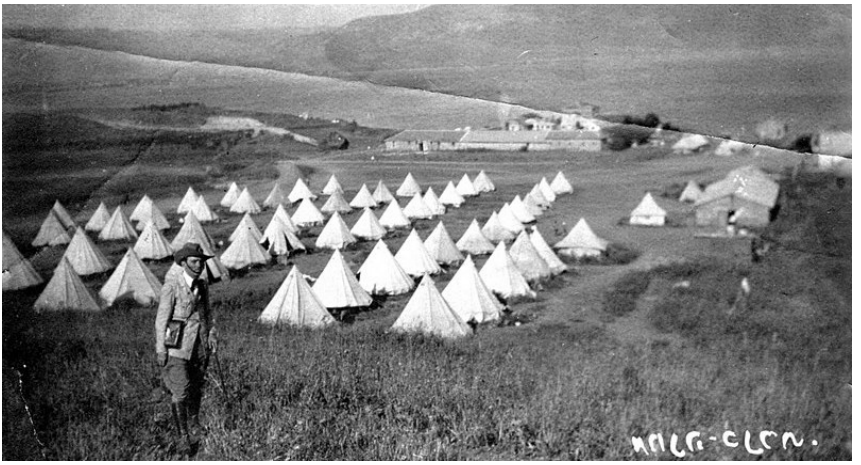
In 1918 there began a new wave of immigration from Europe to Palestine, which lasted until about 1923 and received the name "the Third Aliyah." The upheavals in Europe brought about by World War I and the Russian Revolution shook many European Jews to their core and led them to seek a life elsewhere. But

there was another reason: Palestine had switched hands. It was no longer ruled by the Ottoman Empire, which had crumbled to pieces in the course of World War I, but by the British Empire. In 1917 Lord Alfred Balfour, Lloyd George's foreign secretary, issued a declaration stating that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object." The declaration, as could be expected, elicited a surge of Zionist enthusiasm.

But the enthusiasm was not only Zionist in nature. Like their predecessors of the Second Aliyah, a significant number of the newcomers of the Third Aliyah were avidly socialist and belonged to socialist youth movements prior to their immigration. Unlike their predecessors, however, these newcomers had seen the Russian Revolution with their own eyes. They were profoundly shaped by a newfound conviction that a handful of idealists could, in fact, change the world if they organized properly and managed to draw the masses after them. And so, the socialists of the Third Aliyah arrived in Palestine wishing not merely to transform themselves but to transform the Jewish people as a whole—and ultimately, to be part of an all-encompassing world revolution. As a popular song of that time put it, "To us fate delivered the millions of tomorrow."[26]

The Third Aliyah, like the Second Aliyah, held the ideal of work—distinctly, manual and constructive work—in the highest possible regard. But whereas the work ethos of the Second Aliyah had a spiritual tint to it, in which work—specifically agricultural work—was exalted as the path toward personal redemption, the work ethos of the Third Aliyah was militaristic in essence. To work was to conquer, to subdue, and to prevail in a battle against stagnation and despair. True to this militaristic mindset, the newcomers of the Third Aliyah organized into an army of sorts. Most of them assembled under a governing organization called the Work Battalion (*gedud ha'avodah*), which in turn was divided into "companies," smaller units consisting of people with similar backgrounds, similar political affiliations, or similar professional skills. Other similarly structured organizations existed as well, but the Work Battalion was the largest and most prominent.

Adhering to strict principles of communal sharing of salaries and food, and living in lodgings arranged in formations like military camps, the Work Battalion and its like took charge of the two most ambitious and labor-intensive public projects of the 1920s in Palestine—namely, paving roads and draining swamps (funded by the Palestinian Office for Construction and Public Works with the support of the British government). The different companies were deployed to wherever work was to be found, usually living in tent camps in proximity to the work sites ("proximity" could easily mean five to ten kilometers, which the workers walked twice a day). The ultimate goal was for each company to earn more than it spent. That rarely ever happened.



A Work Battalion tent camp near Tzemah, 1921.

The Work Battalion's heroic efforts are extensively documented not only because the Jewish National Foundation sent photographers to take hundreds of pictures of muscular and tanned Jews at work for fundraising purposes but also because the workers themselves made sure to make their efforts known through letters, speeches, poems, and songs. The following song—written somewhat later, in 1934—pays homage to the epic labors of those who pulverized rocks to pave roads:

Strike, hammer, rise and fall,
We shall stretch roads of concrete upon the sand!
Awake, wilderness, your fate is sealed:
We are coming to conquer you!
The furnace is blazing,
The roller is rolling,
Go forth and subdue,
We still have the power![27]

Away from the cameras, members of the Work Battalion allowed themselves to be more honest about their experiences. Meir Ya'ari (1897–1987), later to become one of the most influential figures in the kibbutz movement, wrote a lengthy report of his experiences in the new country in 1921. Among other things, he wrote,

> You are working by the side of the road. You are sitting on a pile of stones, the sun is blistering. The hammer strikes repeatedly on the stones with a blunt sound and shatters them endlessly, endlessly. The sun squeezes sweat, curses, and resentment out of us. You feel as though you are thoroughly old. The

> strike of the hammer brings you closer to your grave, to your end. The hours are crawling bright, pale, and horrendously hollow [...] You felt yourself gripped by the claws of the social hunger machine, which is greased by putrid sweat and labor, and in return for the sweat and labor it pulls you in between its cogs as you chew on bread and jam—your salary for eight to ten hours a day.[28]

David Malets (1899–1981), whose diaries from those years are otherwise filled with poetic descriptions of his exhilaration with the new country and with the uplifting labor, also related what the daily routine felt like in less glorious moments:

> I went to work this morning. In my mouth, disgust and bitterness, carelessness and listlessness. My feet are dragging, lifeless [...] Excruciating work all day long, a meager and tasteless meal in the evening. A dirty, gloomy tent. A cold, hard bed. And again work, and again a meal. And there was evening, and there was morning. Without a glimmer of hope, without a sparkle of light, without a speck of warmth.[29]

Life in the Work Battalion was brutal. The heat was insurmountable, and malaria was rampant, as were dysentery and typhoid and a host of skin and eye infections. Most workers shared just one or two pairs of shoes among seven or eight people. Food was scarce. They lived in tents that were unbearably stifling in the summer and collapsed in the wind in the winter. Many of them—some say most of them—left. Some settled in more established towns or cities in Palestine, but many returned to Europe or went to the United States. Quite a few, whose life dreams had shattered, who realized that they could not live up to the ideals they cherished more than anything else, took their own lives. It is hard to ascertain how many ended their lives this way, but conservative estimates suggest several dozens.

The harder life was, the more persistent and more vehemently idealistic and ideological the workers who did stay became. The struggle to persevere despite the immense difficulty became a sacred endeavor, a trial by fire through which the truly faithful would be separated from the weaklings and the imposters. Years later, Amos Oz wrote about those who persisted:

> They seemed to have remained after undergoing a Darwinian "natural selection." Stout. Large. Strong. Constant. Hard as stone monuments. Harsh with themselves and with others. [...] And they adhered to an idea: the essence of the idea is stretching oneself—which is both wonderful and horrifying—toward superhuman "purity." Extracting oneself from the bonds of flesh and blood and resembling gods or heroes of old. [...]

> But in the dark, the shifty passions of the heart lurked for those founding fathers as well. Behind the zeal hatred was hidden—and at times downright misanthropy. Behind the self-denial, exhaustion and suppressed desires, and behind the devotion, a lust for power and rule [...] And at night, when no one could hear, they wept longingly for everything that was left and abandoned knowingly so as never to return. Father's house. Or career and honor. Or piano playing and other artistic gentilities. European landscapes, forests and rivers and snow.[30]

Work Battalion members in a quarry, 1928.

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One particular organization within the greater Zionist-socialist landscape of the Third Aliyah took ideological fervor to the extreme, and it would continue to take things to the extreme for many years to come. This organization was *HaShomer HaTza'ir*, roughly translated as The Young Watchman or The Young Protector.

HaShomer HaTza'ir started as a Jewish-Zionist youth movement in Poland in 1913, which was initially inspired by German youth movements such as *Wandervogel* (Wandering Bird) that heralded return to nature, free spiritedness, self-reliance, and strong national commitment. As HaShomer HaTza'ir evolved over the years, it also acquired a strong Marxist-Leninist emphasis. But it always remained true to its origins—and to its name—insofar as youth was at the core of its ideological program. All the socialist pioneers of the Second and Third Aliyahs were proponents of an "out with the old, in with the new" conviction to some extent, but members of HaShomer HaTza'ir were especially radical in their

insistence that everything that could be associated with their parents' generation should be completely discarded. They considered themselves newly made human beings who were actively creating a new way of being human. The poem "The Son's Rebellion" by David Shimoni had the status of sacred scripture among the members of HaShomer HaTza'ir, so much so that when it was posted on the walls of their clubs or meeting spaces, it would be written in the special script reserved only for Torah scrolls:

Do not listen, my son, to the instruction of your father,
And heed not your mother's teachings.
Your father's instruction is "line by line,"
And your mother's teachings are "slowly, slowly..."
But a spring day storm speaks thus:
"Listen, my man, to the song of the son!"[31]

Dozens of members of HaShomer HaTza'ir formed their own work battalion and went wherever the work took them, but the organization's leaders had a very clear vision of what they ultimately wanted to achieve. They wanted a Degania-style agrarian settlement based on principles of communalism, but they wanted to do it better, and they wanted to go all the way: to create a completely different model of human community. An elite squad was necessary in order to pursue this, and the leaders carefully screened different candidates until they finally picked those who were deemed worthy. In August 1920, a group of twenty-seven people—twenty-three men and four women—settled in Upper Bitanya on the mountain ridge directly overlooking the Jordan Valley.

By day, the members of the group paved roads and dug deep pits for planting trees, which was thoroughly exhausting. But real life began at dusk when they were back from their work. They would have endless philosophical and existential conversations about every possible topic in the world. They would talk for hours about Plato and Freud and Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky. But most notably and probably most excruciatingly, they would talk about themselves. This came to be known as Bitanya's "confession cult." Each member, in turn, was expected to lay their anguished soul bare before the entire group. They were asked to tell what they were struggling with and what they were afraid of and whom they loved and whom they hated, what sexual desires consumed them and what existential dreads plagued them, on and on all hours of the night. David Horowitz (1899–1979), one of the leading members in the group, later reflected somewhat disdainfully on his days in Bitanya, calling it "an order of spiritual knights tormented not only by bodily asceticism but also by the tortures of the soul."[32] Here is one description of those tortured souls, written in 1921:

A dark shack. The light of the lamp casts yellow, ugly shadows upon you. You sit with your heads bowed, your grim face nervously shaking, and I sit among

> you, and something depresses and torments me. Why are you so morose? [...] Your lips are pursed tightly, and your eyes are the eyes of drunkards, and you are looking for something in the gray, trodden dirt on the floor [...] You are held back in silence, in anticipation of a redemptive word, waiting for the miracle that would stir the forces that lie dormant in your young, agile body.[33]

The isolation, the enervation, the lack of sleep, the intensity of communal intimacy, and the requirement for unrelenting honesty all bubbled into emotional lava; people were crying, weeping, screaming, shouting, and at times appearing downright psychotic. Those who were there described it as elating and dreadful at one and the same time and defined the experience as transcendental, even mystical. "The truth of life was revealed to me, and it is a hundredfold truer and a hundredfold stronger that the truth acquired through reason," one of them wrote in a letter to his comrades, "You have become brothers and sisters of a holy covenant to me, a convocation of eagles bound by a secret oath and the mystery of youth."[34]

Meir Ya'ari, who spearheaded the Bitanya experiment, was guided by the belief that communal living should be truly communal. His vision was of an anarchic community that should be run without any rules and without prescriptive norms. Sharing property and making decisions jointly were trivial matters, he maintained; to really live together as a community, members need to share every single aspect of *themselves*, of their inner psyches. Nothing should be private, not even one's thoughts or feelings, and the community members must remove all barriers and all defenses amongst themselves. Ya'ari also promoted the idea of an "erotic commune" in which all members, male and female alike, would have sex with all members, male and female alike. Eros between men was viewed as the primordial force that generates vitality and enables men to join together in ventures of creation and conquest, whereas eros between men and women was necessary for procreation and continuity.[35] Marriage and family, however, were looked down upon in Bitanya as bourgeois vestiges that ought to be shunned.

While Ya'ari did include a few women in the group, he did so somewhat reluctantly, openly admitting that this is necessary mostly so as to secure sexual release for the male members. The ideal was a community which is a "pure, spiritual, masculine entity,"[36] and women were regarded as compromising presences within the community. Ya'ari acknowledged that there are women who, through commitment to the commune, could morph into men—become educated, rational, pure of spirit, and independent—but he also thought that these women were especially dangerous since they would ultimately entrap the group's unsuspecting men and lure them into bourgeois family life and spiritual captivity.[37] Ya'ari's positions were extreme by all counts and objectionable to quite a few of his comrades; even he did not hold onto them for very long (by the end of 1921 he had gotten married), but quandaries regarding erotic fulfillment, erotic

liberation, and erotic sublimation within the intensive intimacy of the commune remained a staple of HaShomer HaTza'ir for years to come.

The settlement in Bitanya lasted less than one year before it fell apart. Some of the members could not handle the pressure and left, and one member killed himself. The remaining members eventually established new kibbutzim that did not quite replicate Bitanya's extreme model but continued to maintain a spirit of radicalism and a self-perception of "we are the real deal," looking at other kibbutzim somewhat from above. Bitanya became the founding myth of HaShomer HaTza'ir and, to some extent, a myth of the kibbutz movement as a whole. The kibbutzim founded by HaShomer HaTza'ir presented a more totalizing and uncompromising approach to communalism, a more unyielding rejection of anything that had a whiff of bourgeoisie to it, and also a more universalist version of Zionism that advocated a Jewish-Arab partnership and objected to the dispossession of the Arab Palestinians. The latter point is somewhat ironic considering that almost each and every kibbutz of HaShomer HaTza'ir, starting with Beit Alfa that was established in the Jezreel Valley in 1922, was built on land where Arab Palestinians lived. The Jezreel Valley is where the next part of the story begins, and that is where the word *kibbutz* itself finally comes to the fore.

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In 1920 a remarkable thing happened: the Jewish National Foundation managed to acquire 50,000 dunam (about 12,500 acres) of land in the Jezreel Valley, which spans more or less from the Jordan Valley in the east to Haifa in the west. For the Zionist settlement project, which usually acquired (or as they called it back then, "redeemed,") lands piecemeal, this was an intoxicating accomplishment, a wild dream come true. Granted, the Jewish National Foundation was able to buy this swath of land for a bargain price because it was not the most desirable place to live. In particular, the area featured swamplands that swarmed with *Anopheles* mosquitoes, the notorious vectors of malaria. But here were those idealists of the Work Battalion who were willing to take on any challenge, the more trying and miserable, the better. If not them, who?

The uninhabitable Jezreel Valley that the Work Battalion set out to conquer with their hammers and plows was, of course, like most areas in Palestine, already inhabited—by Arab Palestinians. But neither the Work Battalion nor the Zionist functionaries who charged its members with the task intended to let that get in the way. The lands of the Nuris district, on the northeastern side of the Jezreel Valley, were owned by a wealthy family from Beirut named Sursock, and approximately five hundred tenants lived on those lands at the time. After the lands were acquired from the Sursock family, the tenants received instructions from Yehoshua Hankin, who orchestrated the Jezreel valley purchase, about two hours before the Work Battalion's arrival: they were not to interrupt the Work Battalion as its people set up their tents in the area, and they were strongly

encouraged to leave altogether. Those who left would be compensated, and those who stayed would have to lease their land from the National Jewish Foundation. The people of Nuris tried to argue, realized that they didn't have much choice, and eventually agreed. Sort of.

How can this treatment of the local population be reconciled with the socialist ideals of "workers of the entire world unite" and a "brotherhood of man"? Many, many apologetic attempts to do so have been made over the years, and I will return to this issue later on. But it is important to recognize at the outset that all those communal living experiments that would eventually turn into kibbutzim were made possible, operationally and financially, through the support of Zionist organizations, and those organizations had one overarching goal: to settle as many Jews as possible in Palestine. The Zionist movement was a national movement par excellence, which was concerned—as national movements by definition are—only and exclusively with the interest of the Jewish people. As geographer Arnon Golan put it, "You can think of it in terms of removing rocks from the ground before you plow it. Once you've set the rocks aside, you don't think about them anymore. Once you've removed the tenants and compensated them, they are no longer your concern."[38] From the perspective of Zionist organizations at the time, lands in Palestine were purchased fair and square from their owners, and those who had to leave those lands were tenants with no claim to the land anyway. This was not supposed to be a problem. From the Arab Palestinian perspective, this was the beginning of a process of systematic dispossession of people who had lived on those lands for centuries, well before the Zionist movement came about, and this dispossession continues to this very day.

One man in particular had a dream about the extensive lands of Nuris. His name was Shlomo Levkovitz (he later changed his name to Lavi). Levkovitz (1882–1963) was a Second Aliyah ideologue and organizer who had a clear vision for the next stage of communal settlement in Palestine. Instead of small and intimate Degania-style groups with a few dozen members at most, he was arguing for sizeable and robust settlements of hundreds or even thousands of members. Lavi maintained that Degania and the likes of it were examples of boutique socialism: certainly founded on good and just principles but unscalable, and in the long run they would be nothing more than curious and ultimately marginal anecdotes in the history of Zionist socialism. Levkovitz wished to create a massive and entirely self-sustaining and autonomous village that would include not only agricultural operations but also industry, craftsmanship, printing presses, arts—everything you'd normally find in a city. He summarized the difference between his approach and the "intimate group" approach with a "dot versus row" metaphor:

> You members of the small group aspire to intimacy, to closed doors—but we want space; yours is a dot—but ours is a row; you limit yourself to agriculture—but we wish to blend the city and the countryside; you select your members and disqualify others—but we accept all. Because in the large

> group, even people whose [ideological] consciousness is not fully developed may live. Whoever does not want to cross paths with another member would not be forced to do so. In a large group anything is possible.[39]

The newly acquired territory of Nuris was just large enough to turn this vision into reality, Levkovitz thought, and he approached the leadership of the Work Battalion to suggest that they start a new permanent settlement by the Spring of Harod at the foot of Mount Gilboa. This massive type of settlement was to be called *kibbutz*, which means "collection" or "congregation," to distinguish it from *kvutzah*, which means "group." Both words derive from the same root (*kbtz*), meaning "to bring together," but the size and scale were different. The first settlement that referred to itself as a kibbutz was established in September 1921 and received the name of the spring that marked its location: Ein Harod.

Woman drawing water from the Spring of Harod in the Jezreel Valley (picture taken in 1946 in a "reenactment" of Ein Harod's first days).

The location was historically and symbolically meaningful. The Spring of Harod is where, according to the biblical book of Judges, the charismatic leader Gideon convened the tribes of Israel and elected the most capable and the bravest men to fight against the Midianites. Gideon's selection method was quite original: he had everyone stand by the spring and told them to get a drink of water. Three hundred of them cupped water in their hands and slurped standing up, whereas

the rest went down on their knees and drank directly from the spring. Those who went down on their knees were dismissed; those who remained standing were recruited to Gideon's elite army. This kind of elite squad of proud, ready-for-anything, unwavering heroes is what the new settlers in what would become Ein Harod wanted to create. But whereas the biblical Gideon attempted to pare down his large army into a small and selective unit of hand-picked soldiers, the founding members of Ein Harod were attempting to do the opposite: to take a small core of uniquely committed and resilient individuals and to turn it into a mass movement.

But a mass movement to what end? Here notable rifts between the ideologues of the Second Aliyah and the leadership of the Work Battalion quickly began to form. The former, most notably the aforementioned Shlomo Levkovitz (Lavi) and Yitzhak Tabenkin, who later became the political leader of the United Kibbutz Movement, wanted to pursue the "grand kibbutz" vision and to invest all the resources, human and material, into growing Ein Harod and turning it into an autonomous large-scale village. The latter maintained that Ein Harod should function as a launching base for as many kibbutzim as possible that would venture to new places and settle new territories. Their idea was effectively to continue the deployment method of the Work Battalion as well as its social and economic organization, in which all proceeds from the work went to the general treasury of the Battalion and were then distributed among the members. In 1923, the disagreements became so insurmountable that Ein Harod splintered; the "grand kibbutz" faction stayed in Ein Harod, whereas those who promoted the model of establishing multiple kibbutzim under one umbrella organization moved two kilometers to the southeast and started a new kibbutz named Tel Yosef. This was not the last time that Ein Harod would split into two.

Levkovitz's vision of a massive kibbutz came true only partially. While Ein Harod did adopt a stance of constant expansion and defined itself as "ever-growing and open," numbering several thousand members in its heyday, it never became the self-contained and self-sustaining operation that he had dreamed of. Rather, Ein Harod became one of many kibbutzim—albeit by all means the most important—assembled together under one national governing body. Ironically, it was Tabenkin—who initially supported Levkovitz against the Work Battalion leaders who propagated the idea of a central kibbutz organization with many branches—who eventually adopted a very similar approach. Under Tabenkin's political and spiritual leadership, Ein Harod became the headquarters of the United Kibbutz Movement (*hakibbutz hame'uhad*), which included about half of the kibbutzim in Palestine/Israel until the early 1950s. Tabenkin rejected the communist model of the Work Battalion, according to which all kibbutzim under the central leadership share all resources communally, and instead advocated for social and economic autonomy for each kibbutz. He did, however, promote ideological and organizational unity across all the kibbutzim of the United Kibbutz Movement. As a result, the kibbutz quickly transformed from an avant-garde way

of life into an institution largely bound by structural conformity such that many kibbutzim appeared like indistinguishable replicas of one another.

A large kibbutz, as one could expect, is a much more complicated operation than a small kvutzah like Degania. Twenty or thirty members can gather around a table and have a conversation, even if it is a lengthy and tedious one; but two or three hundred members cannot decide everything by consensus. Organizational structures and bylaws thus became critical, and different governing entities and positions had to be created. Under the prevailing organizational structure of the kibbutz, the full assembly of all members functioned as a parliament—a legislative branch—which elected the kibbutz's administration, the executive branch. The administration consisted of the kibbutz's chief secretary, the kibbutz's treasurer, the secretary of the farm (who was in charge of agricultural and industrial operations), the secretary of the community (who was in charge of the community's social life and personal issues), and a host of standing and ad hoc committees. All members were supposed to rotate among the different committees and roles such that at one point or another every member would hold a leadership position. This way equality would be maintained despite the seemingly hierarchical structure; (s)he who serves as treasurer today will be cleaning toilets next week, and vice versa. Self-governance thereby emerged as one of the most sacred principles of the kibbutz movement, which set it apart from coercive top-down communist structures such as those formed in the Soviet Union.

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Before long, the Jezreel Valley was filled with new kibbutzim. Everyday life in all those kibbutzim was quite similar. The residents lived in tents and later in wooden shacks with straw covering the dirt floor; water had to be carried every night from the spring in jugs and barrels and had to be used sparingly; each kibbutz featured one sizable structure that served as a communal dining hall and place of assembly; work continued to take the form of arduous labor for projects to serve the common good, especially draining swamps; at night people either collapsed into their beds, exhausted, or sang and danced in ecstasy until morning, in what was either an expression of unrelenting optimism or a display of despair.

When Hannah Hoffman, a young Jewish woman from New York, came to Palestine in 1925, she toured the Jezreel Valley for about two weeks before she decided to settle in Tel Yosef. She was captivated by the singing, the dancing, the intoxicatingly beautiful nature, and above all the youthful energy; it was a world without adults, a Neverland. As Hannah's biographer, her granddaughter Yaara Bar-On, observed, Hannah's enchantment with Palestine and with Tel Yosef was aesthetic and emotional, not ideological: "Like many of her peers, Hannah searched for a romantic adventure, to which ideology merely added an aspect of enchantment. Bright stars in the sky, tall mountains and blue skies, sunsets, rainbows, and singing in harmony on the hill—that was the essence [...] A

midsummer night's dream, or perhaps, an unending summer camp, a place where kids can do whatever they wish, free from accountability to their parents."[40]

Hannah's letters home as well as the diary she kept offer an invaluable perspective on the experience of the early kibbutz distinctly because Hannah was a very atypical kibbutz member. Unlike most members of the Work Battalion, who came from Eastern Europe, Hannah was American, a graduate of Smith College, and unlike her comrades in the kibbutz who were thoroughly indoctrinated in Zionist socialism and in communal ideology, Hannah had little notion of what she was getting into. Hannah could barely speak Hebrew, nor could she communicate with her comrades in the languages most of them spoke—Russian, Yiddish, or Polish. She encountered a way of life and a set of expectations that she did not fully understand and did not relate to, which eventually broke her.

Daily work in Tel Yosef, Hannah soon found out, was extremely difficult—not only because it was physically draining but also because most people, including her, had no idea what they were doing, so they were learning on the job through trial and error. Waste—both of resources and of energy—was tremendous. Hannah describes how she and a group of other women were figuring out how to wash the enormous piles of dirty clothes they were charged with (which was done outside in cauldrons of boiling water placed on an open fire).[41] Boil the water first then add the soap? Or boil the water with the soap already in it? And how to get rid of all the grime that rises to the surface? And how to clean the cauldron afterwards?

Later, Hannah was dispatched to work in the kitchen, like most women, and she got to know the food predicaments up close. She was responsible for feeding hordes of hungry people with barely any resources. Much of the time the kitchen workers had no access to basics like flour, sugar, or oil. Sometimes weeks went by without having bread. Lacking proper refrigeration or sanitary conditions, food often spoiled or went rancid—but they still ate it. Whenever there were luxury products, such as figs or chocolate or butter, they would usually be snatched up before most members would have a chance to enjoy them. Golda Meir, the future prime minister of Israel who was a kibbutz member in the early 1920s, described how much women in her kibbutz hated working in the kitchen, and while she attempted to encourage them by saying that feeding humans is no less worthy than feeding cows, she also recognized that the available products were so meager and of such low quality that kitchen workers felt like they failed before they even started.[42]

What one could not find at all in a kibbutz, not even for a minute, was privacy. People roomed together, three or four in a tent or a shack, and they all ate together in the same dining hall. People also showered together (with a makeshift tin partition separating the men's showers from the women's showers), and the latrines were public, without doors on the stalls. One was to quickly eradicate any sense of shame or modesty to survive in a kibbutz. In a letter home, Hannah explained that she didn't bother covering herself when she was changing her clothes, not only because it was cumbersome but also because there was no point;

the door was always open, and even if she were to close it, the windows were at ground level and there were no curtains.[43] The walls were very thin, and secrets could never be kept. To some extent because everyone knew everything about everyone anyway, but also out of defiance of bourgeois manners and old-world courtesies, personal interactions in the kibbutz were usually blunt, uncouth, and in-your-face. To put it plainly, people were not very nice to each other. To be fair to them, it is extremely difficult to be nice to so many people so much of the time. Years later, Golda Meir commented that if back in the 1920s kibbutz members were afforded the two things that became available to them in the 1950s—private toilets and the ability to make a cup of tea in one's own room—thousands of people who left the kibbutzim would have probably stayed.[44]

Hannah was resigned to the lack of privacy as well as to the demands of communal living. In a letter to her parents, she reported how upon joining the kibbutz she willingly gave all her clothes to the common clothing supplies, as one does, except for her Sabbath dress. A day later one of her comrades berated her, making it clear that she was expected to give *everything* to the common supplies, including her favorite Sabbath dress. Hannah dutifully handed over her Sabbath dress to the shared clothing supplies. The following Friday, she saw that very same comrade who educated her on communality wearing that same dress. Hannah never told her parents of this event, which devastated her, but she told her granddaughters about it over and over again with a clear message: the kibbutz is a dangerous place where those who are weak and innocent fall prey to those who are powerful and manipulative under the guise of communality.[45] Three years later Hannah Hoffman returned to America, having experienced a severe mental breakdown. She eventually came back to Palestine in 1934 and had three daughters (two of them continued to become kibbutz members themselves), but she never forgave the kibbutz. Her granddaughter mentions that in her will she stipulated that her daughters would only get their share in the inheritance if they do not hand it over to the kibbutz.[46]

When reading memories of the earliest kibbutz members, it is quite striking how people who bravely endured the most wretched living and working conditions imaginable remained traumatized for decades to come by the seemingly trivial—yet highly symbolic—ritual of giving all their possessions to the collective. A watch given as a graduation gift, a silk handkerchief that belonged to mother, a sweater knitted by a loving girlfriend—everything was taken away, leaving people much more wounded than they could admit. In one especially zealous commune, even family and personal photos were collected from each member and arranged in a shared photo album, and personal letters had to be shared with all.[47]

But even in those very early years of ideological frenzy, there were kibbutz members who confessed that they found the lack of privacy and the iron-fisted demands of collectivity cruel and inhumane. One of the most moving documents from the early years of Ein Harod was written by a woman who signed her letter

to the kibbutz's newspaper with the pseudonym "Rachel," much later to be identified as Lilia Basevitch. Basevitch's pseudonymous letter referred to a practice that formed in Ein Harod (and in the kibbutzim that replicated it) in the late 1920s of having one unmarried kibbutz member room with each couple that lived together. This practice was known as "the third" and sometimes, facetiously, as "the primus" (a primus being a portable kerosene burner with three legs that makes a lot of noise and is bound to explode—hence the metaphor). The official reason for this arrangement was a shortage of housing units—there were too many members in the kibbutz and too few rooms to allow two people to live on their own, even if they were a couple—but it was quite evident that this was also the kibbutz's way to forcefully weaken the bond and the intimacy of couples, which were seen as a threat to the collectivistic mindset. Basevitch may have chosen the pseudonym Rachel as an allusion to the biblical Rachel of the book of Genesis, who had to share her husband with her sister. She wrote,

> We live together, the three of us in one room: me, him—and her, my roommate. Just a thin sheet separating us from her. We have been living this way for two years, but I have not gotten used to it yet, nor will I ever get used to it [...] Sometimes I cannot sleep at night. I lie awake listening to the sound of her breath...and then, when I think she has fallen asleep, I approach him, praying that she won't wake up...At times, at the moment of utmost closeness, I hear her rolling over in her bed. At that moment I feel like my body is being dragged out in the streets for all to see [...] My land, my kibbutz, I will never betray you, my life is here. But is this something you demand of me, too? To have my love be so crushed, so flawed? Is this sacrifice really required?[48]

Basevitch's letter had an impact, and the practice of "the third" was discontinued shortly thereafter—although the official reason, once again, was that the housing crisis was resolved due to a boom of new construction.

While the kibbutz at least initially discouraged the intimacy of couples, it was extremely passionate about what such intimacy was destined to yield, namely, children. Children symbolized longevity, perpetuity, permanence; children were also the screen on which the founding members projected their fantasies about a just, healthy, ideal society, untarnished by the ailments of exile and capitalism. Children were the apple of the kibbutz's eye, the most important crop of all. They were crops in a literal sense: every year in the Jewish festival of Shavuot, in which the first fruits and the first harvest were celebrated, each kibbutz would hold a procession displaying the year's yield—the wheat, the tomatoes, the bananas, the cows, the corn, the honey, and so on—and at the forefront, the new babies.

Children in Tel Yosef, circa 1930.

"We were children of the wild," Yael Tabenkin (Yizhak Tabenkin's daughter-in-law), who was born in Ein Harod in 1923, reminisced, "We were constantly strolling and frolicking, we loved the valley. We did not feel like we were making history; we felt like we were living the most wonderful life. We lived in shacks that were falling apart, we were basically a shanty town…and we had the most spectacular childhood."[49] The children were constantly engaged in creative activities, learning new songs and dances, and putting on shows, but they were also taught to work more or less from the day they were born. School hours were from 8 a.m. until noon, at noon the children would go to their parents' rooms to rest for two hours, and at 2 p.m. they would go to work. Even three- and four-year-old children would be given simple tasks, like husking corn or collecting dry branches, all the while singing songs about the very work that they were doing at the time.

It is certainly true that children got the best of everything each kibbutz had to offer, even when it had practically nothing. The first permanent structure to be built in any kibbutz—with concrete floors that could be washed regularly and with concrete walls and a roof that could protect one from mice, from snakes, from scorpions, and from the merciless heat—was always the children's house. Having all the children live in one house, separate from their parents, was initially a matter of necessity, as the shacks and the tents in which the parents lived were considered too unsafe for children. Moreover, the young mothers in the early kibbutzim had absolutely no idea how to take care of their children. They were in their early twenties, far away from their own mothers or from experienced

relatives or neighbors, and they were terrified that they might kill their own babies. The kibbutz believed in professionalization; just as it sent members to study agronomy or animal husbandry or electrical engineering so that they could better serve their kibbutz, it sent several women to be schooled in the newest theories and practices of hygiene and child development that prevailed at the time. It made sense to have those who were specialists in childcare do the childcare and to release the mothers from those duties—whether they wanted to be released or not—to do other work. But like other things that started as matters of necessity in the kibbutz, this one, too, quickly turned into an ideology.

In 1924, when Ein Harod had seventy-five children, the kibbutz assembly met to discuss the question of whether children would sleep at night with their parents or in the communal children's house. Until that point, this was up to the individual parents (in smaller kvutzot, like Degania, the norm was for children to sleep with their parents, and it stayed this way), but now it was decided that the matter was too grave and too ideologically important to be left to individual discretion. Quite a few members maintained that children would benefit from some time spent quietly with their parents, and they certainly would not be harmed. Some even said that there was something inhumane about separating children from parents at night. "It is an unnatural thing to do, and no social form would tolerate it," said teacher Shmuel Savorai. Another member pointed out that members even had a hard time giving their personal belongings to the communal supplies, so asking them to give away their children was downright cruel. Most members, however, were in favor of children sleeping together in the children's house. How are parents supposed to get up for work in the morning if they spend the night with a screaming child? And how much work time would be wasted picking the children up and dropping them off every day? "If we knew that communal sleeping is harmful, of course we would avoid it," said one member, "but we actually know that to be the case for family-based sleeping!"[50] This member was evidently referring to Freud's theories, according to which the nuclear family was pathological in essence, and a child who sees their parents' intimacy would be scarred for life.

The debate on communal sleeping arrangements for children divulged a more deep-seated conviction, namely, that the children's education was too important to be entrusted to the parents. We know what parents would do if the children spent the night with them, warned one member of Ein Harod: here they would give the child a toy that they made just for them, there they would tell a story with the wrong kind of message, "all these things can bring all of our efforts to naught [...] For children to be part of our society their education must be coherent and consistent." Another member said this plainly: "The private household is disqualified, in my view, from serving as an educational force. One must not leave the child in the hands of his parents in the evening, before sleep, when it is most impressionable."[51] A vote was held, and a decision was reached: kibbutz children will sleep communally and not with their parents.

In Ein Harod, curiously, the decision was somewhat qualified; children would sleep in the children's house until the age of six, when they are still in need of much physical care and are most disruptive to their parents, and then they would sleep with their parents from the age of six to the age of fourteen to allow for some parent-child bonding. At the age of fourteen, they would go back to sleeping communally so they become independent and communally minded. The eight years of exception to the communal sleeping rule were granted due to the pressure of Eva Tabenkin, whose husband's voice carried a great deal of weight. In the other kibbutzim of the United Kibbutz Movement as well as in the kibbutzim of HaShomer HaTza'ir, which were more extreme about everything, the rule was applied without exceptions. HaShomer HaTza'ir was so adamant to defy the connection between parents and children and to define it strictly in mechanical, biological terms, that in the kibbutzim of HaShomer HaTza'ir children never even called their parents "mom" or "dad" but only by their first names. It was assumed that each and every kibbutz member could and should play a parental role toward each and every kibbutz child, but ultimately the supreme parent and the highest authority in matters of education was the kibbutz itself.

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By the end of the third decade of the twentieth century, there were already dozens of kibbutzim, and for many Zionists in Palestine and abroad, living in a kibbutz and realizing the Zionist dream became one and the same thing. Many people tried it out for a few weeks, a few months, or for a few years before they felt crushed by the trying physical conditions, the lack of privacy, the constant presence of others, and by the requirement that the individual completely surrender to the collective—and left. But those who did stay as well as thousands of Zionist Jews who looked at those who stayed from the sidelines believed that there was nothing more noble, nothing more important, nothing more heroic, than what was happening in the kibbutzim. And the years to come, with the challenges they presented to the Jewish population in Palestine, only intensified this conviction.

3

A Green Flame

1930–1939

Rest has come for the weary
And respite for the laborer.
A pale night is descending
On the fields of the valley of Jezreel.
Dew from below and the moon from above
From Beit Alfa to Nahalal.
What's between this night and other nights?
Silence in Jezreel.
Sleep, oh valley, land of glory,
We shall stand watch for you. [52]

Nathan Alterman (1910–1970), who wrote "The Song of the Valley" as an ode to the workers' villages of the Jezreel Valley in 1934, was not actually in the Jezreel Valley as he ventured to capture its moonlit landscape with his prolific pen. This hymn-like song, which like many other songs by Alterman about fields and plows and furrows and sickles soon became part of the Zionist soundtrack of the 1930s and 1940s, was written in a café in Tel Aviv, probably after Alterman had a few glasses of Johnnie Walker. Alterman wrote "The Song of the Valley" on commission; the United Israel Appeal (*keren hayesod*) was producing a documentary film for fundraising purposes that would feature the marvel of newly established Jewish life in Palestine, and Alterman was asked by composer Daniel Sambursky (1909–1977) to write the lyrics to a song in praise of the valley's pioneers. In the film itself, Sambursky is shown playing the piano in the dining room of kibbutz Giv'at Brenner, teaching the new song to the kibbutz members, who then continue to sing "The Song of the Valley" as they go about their everyday activities: peeling potatoes, milking cows, and hanging washed clothes to dry.[53]

The film, titled *The Land of Promise*, was quite successful and was shown widely in Britain, the United States, and Germany (mere weeks before the passing of the Nürnberg Laws). It also won an award at the Venice Film Festival of 1935.

"The Song of the Valley," a song written by a poet from the Tel Aviv art scene about the kibbutz so that kibbutz members would sing it about themselves—so that they would be filmed singing it about themselves for fundraising purposes—in many ways encapsulates the story of the kibbutz in the 1930s. The kibbutz was the flagship of the Zionist revolution, the distilled essence of its efforts to create a new Jewish person and of its unwavering ability to weather tremendous challenges. As relations between Jews and Arab Palestinians became more and more tense and violent conflicts ensued, the kibbutzim played an increasingly significant role in forming the forces of "Hebrew Defense," as they were called back then. As the prospect of a division of Palestine into two states became tangible, kibbutzim were charged with the task of charting the borders of the Jewish state-to-be by settling in the most remote and hostile territories, and they were quickly mythicized as paragons of courage and resilience. Twenty years after its emergence, the kibbutz was no longer a curious experiment that was likely to fail at any moment. It was a tried-and-true model and an inspiration not only for the future Jewish state (which was already spoken of in terms of "when" rather than "if') but also for the path that each individual ought to pursue if they wished to rise to the highest summits of which humans are capable. Whatever kibbutz members did, they knew they were being looked at—not only by one another but also by the entire Jewish people and maybe (so they thought) by the entire world.

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In 1930 the population of the kibbutzim constituted approximately two percent of the Jewish population in Palestine, an insignificant amount from a numerical perspective. Yet the cultural, political, and ideological weight of the kibbutz movement was vastly greater than its demographic weight. Faithful to the vision that the kibbutz's task was to revolutionize Jewish society as a whole and to entangle Zionism with socialism on the broadest possible scale, kibbutz organizations began to spread the word, the message, and "the way" by reaching out to youth both in Palestine and abroad. Kibbutzim were largely divided, with few exceptions, into three organizations: the United Kibbutz, the largest and most inclusive of the three; the Land-Wide Kibbutz (*kibbutz artzi*), exclusive to the ever-idiosyncratic HaShomer HaTza'ir; and the Association of Kvutzot (*hever hakvutzot*), binding together smaller and more intimate groups in the spirit of Degania. Each organization had a youth movement that sent councilors and delegates to educate, indoctrinate, and also prepare young people in towns and cities for kibbutz life through various camps, trips, and training sessions.

The mode of operation of the youth movements, which was envisioned by Yitzhak Tabenkin of the United Kibbutz and emulated by the other organizations

as well, was to establish "kernels" that would eventually turn into independent kibbutzim but would continue to draw their guidance and inspiration from the "mother" kibbutz that formed them. First, when they are children and teenagers, a strong emotional and ideological connection to the movement would be cultivated in young people in their hometowns; then, they would join an existing kibbutz as a group for about a year and learn hands-on how to live a kibbutz life; finally, when they were ready, they would continue on to the heroic task of forming a new kibbutz on their own. Rachel Rabin-Ya'akov (the sister of Yitzhak Rabin, future prime minister and one of Israel's leading generals) serves as an example of this well-orchestrated training process. She was born in Tel Aviv in 1925 and was educated by avidly socialist parents, who also sent her to a school for "children of workers." The Zionist-socialist education she received at home and at school was bolstered and intensified in the Working Youth movement, which was an offshoot of the United Kibbutz. In 1942, having graduated from high school, Rachel was sent with her kernel—namely, the members of the Tel Aviv branch of the Working Youth with whom she grew up—to a training period in kibbutz Kefar Gil'adi, and in 1943 she climbed up with her comrades to the northwestern summit of the Galilee's panhandle to start a new kibbutz, Manara.[54] There was a special word back then for the course that culminated in one's settlement in a kibbutz: *hagshamah*, which means something like "making real" or "making concrete." This word was used widely in the Zionist-socialist youth movements to refer to the highest point on the path upon which one embarked when one joined the movement as a child. It is the same verb used to describe a dream coming true.

Even teenagers who were not affiliated with a formal kibbutz movement, who lived in cities like Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, grew up with a strong sense that joining a kibbutz, or better yet starting a new kibbutz, was the ultimate and highest goal. Self-selecting groups of four, eight, or twelve enthusiastic friends would form in high schools and spontaneously decide to start a commune, planning to work in the city at first—in a factory or in construction—so as to get used to physical labor and modest subsistence before seeking a kibbutz that would take them. Student newspapers from those days are filled with diatribes against teenagers who were putting efforts into their schoolwork with the hope of pursuing a professional or academic career, who were seen as having misguided priorities and as preparing themselves for unproductive life. This idealistic zeal and the tendency to put kibbutz life on a pedestal is not quite surprising considering that these teenagers' kindergarten teachers used to sing to them songs such as this one during lunch time:

Eat, children, homeland-grown bread!
The wheat grew by the Kinneret.
The people of Degania labored in sweat,
Where the light of the sun is sevenfold great.

Where a watchman does not sleep nor a farmer rest,
And even a child knows how to plant.[55]

Women washing clothes in a kibbutz circa 1935.

When those idealistic youngsters eventually achieved their dreams and joined a kibbutz, they encountered the trying conditions that they more or less expected. In the 1930s, kibbutzim were still struggling with the basics of housing, subsistence, healthcare, and sanitation. Malaria was wiping people out; at any given time about twenty percent of the members were sick. The food was meager and poor in quality. No shaded spot could be found under the blazing sun. This was all part of the deal; it was *supposed* to be hard. But looking back at those days, some of those who joined kibbutzim in the 1930s commented that certain elements of this hardship were self-imposed. One member of kibbutz Beit HaShita, who joined in 1937, described her first assignment, which was washing piles and piles of dirty clothes, at first boiling them in a cauldron and then scraping them on wooden boards for hours. There was no sewer, and when the water used for washing was dumped out on the ground, the entire area would turn into a swamp. The washers stood inside this swamp—none of them had boots—and hung the clean clothes to dry, praying that none of them would fall into the mud. When this member's mother came to visit her after a few weeks, she was startled to see her daughter emaciated, pale, and agonizing in unrelenting back pain. She begged her daughter to come home for a week to rest, and the daughter complied. After two

days, this member received a telegram from the kibbutz secretary berating her and demanding that she come back immediately as kibbutz members cannot rest at the expense of their parents (that would be unfair toward those who do not have parents in whose homes they could recover). Upon her return, she was publicly called out and shamed in the members' general assembly—a common mechanism of scrutiny and social control in those days.[56]

Another member of the same kibbutz spoke with pain about the harsh, uncompromising social norms of those years, which caused great—and in retrospect, unnecessary—suffering: "There were many other difficulties, things we did not even try to solve, perhaps because of this inconceivable martyrdom [...] We never thought of how we could make things easier for ourselves. Some of these things are really weighing on my conscience."[57] She continues to tell how there was a firm rule that children could not come to the general dining hall; they ate in their own dining hall in the children's house. However, during the hours that dinner was served in the general dining hall, the children's houses were closed (because the caretakers themselves left to get their own rest and their own dinner), so these were the hours when children were in their parents' rooms. If there were two parents, they would take turns staying with the children while the other would get dinner. But in single-parent families, or if one of the parents was away, this was a problem:

> I would leave Elisheva alone in the room and go to the dining hall. She was only three years old [...] There wasn't even an electric kettle in the room, not to mention a sink or a plate. It didn't even occur to me to eat in my room. I worked really hard and had to eat [...] And that child, disciplined and patient and cooperative, would stay in the room, and only years later I found out that she'd lie on the bed terrified because she thought there was a snake underneath, and she'd lie there curled up waiting for me to come back [...] To this day I cannot forgive myself.[58]

It was not until the late 1940s that kibbutz members actively began to think of how they could make their lives a little bit easier, both in terms of relaxing the stringency of rules and in terms of everyday comforts, and each one of the changes that came through was met with vehement resistance from the hard-liners. Legend has it that the first kibbutz that dared to replace the backless benches in the dining hall with chairs was almost kicked out of the United Kibbutz Movement under the charge that it was no longer a kibbutz.

While the different kibbutz movements were cajoling the Jewish youth of Palestine to join them, their leaders set out on a much more ambitious and large-scale enterprise of bringing forth the Jewish youth of Europe. Throughout the 1930s,

the kibbutzim sent messengers and delegates to Europe, primarily to Poland, so as to train young Jews there for kibbutz life. In doing so, they relied on a robust infrastructure of Zionist youth organizations that was already in place in Eastern Europe, but they actively steered those organizations in the kibbutz direction. A Zionist organization named *HeHalutz* (The Pioneer) had existed since the 1890s, supporting Jews who wanted to immigrate to Palestine by teaching Hebrew and providing various informational materials. As of the 1920s, it put special emphasis on creating a youth movement, *HeHalutz HaTza'ir* (The Young Pioneer). Yitzhak Tabenkin, who spent an extensive period of time in Warsaw in the 1930s, latched onto this youth movement and made it a branch of the United Kibbutz, designating its members to serve as a sizable task force that would replicate and enlarge the kibbutz on a massive scale. Tabenkin saw before his eyes an enormous human reservoir of hundreds of thousands of young people who could—after proper training—be brought to Palestine and assigned to existing and ultimately to new kibbutzim, and the other kibbutz movements quickly followed suit.

Training farms were created in various places in Eastern Europe, where the local youth received—in addition to substantive immersion in Hebrew language and culture and heavy ideological indoctrination—a firsthand experience of the rough living conditions and demands of work-based communal life. It should be noted that that there were also some kibbutz training activities among Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa—in Damascus, in Baghdad, and in Alexandria, among others—but those were few and far between in comparison to the ambitious operations in Europe, which was also where the kibbutz's ideologues' hearts truly were. In Poland alone there were over three hundred kibbutz training farms. These farms attracted men and women from all walks of Jewish society—barely literate and highly educated, children of well-off urban families and penniless orphans. Some of them were thoroughly versed in the Zionist-socialist ideology and came as true believers whereas others—some would say most—mainly sought out something more exciting and adventurous to do with their lives than being a peddler or a clerk, a housewife or a butcher.

The training farms in Europe made the actual kibbutzim look like a joke. In many of those farms the trainees lived on the brink of starvation, powering through the winter blizzards with nothing but the shirts on their backs and shoes made out of car tires, working until their hands bled in the most grueling of labors and then frantically dancing at night. The most iconic of those farms, which served as a model for numerous others, was the Klosova (Klesów) farm in Volhynia (now in western Ukraine) or as it was formally titled, "The Quarrymen Kibbutz in Klosova."

Klosova was more reminiscent of a gulag than a kibbutz. I do not make this comparison flippantly; the trainees of Klosova, men and women alike, worked in a basalt quarry where only convicted criminals had worked up to that point. Twenty to thirty people lived in a single shack, open to wind and snow, sleeping on the floor and eating mostly half-rotten potatoes. The trainees called the place

Keinemland, that is, "nothingland." A coordinator of HeHalutz HaTza'ir who came to visit Klosova recorded his impressions with a mixture of horror and admiration; the trainees appeared to him as "torn rags covered in mud [...] slowly they morph into human beings, entangled like a coil; out of this coil emanates, as it were, a muffled growl. Day and night this coil whirls endlessly."[59] Leaders of the kibbutz movements from Palestine who visited Klosova and the likes of it were often quite appalled, saying that this was a gross misinterpretation of the kibbutz idea; the kibbutz is a framework intended to benefit and uplift humans, they said, whereas some of the training farms in Poland seemed to be engaging in cruelty for cruelty's sake. Nevertheless, those who survived the ordeal and eventually immigrated to Palestine cherished their time in Klosova as a brutal but exhilarating experience that prepared them to withstand any difficulty they ever encountered in their later lives as kibbutz members.

The Quarrymen Kibbutz at Klosova, 1930.

To be sure, not all members of Zionist-socialist youth movements went through the wringer of the training farms, even if they were keen on immigrating to Palestine and joining a kibbutz. Some were met with too much resistance from their parents; for others, the ideological fervor could not compete with the duty to support family or the allure of artistic or intellectual pursuits; and there were some who were deemed, or deemed themselves, unfit. My grandfather, Nathan Rotenstreich (1914–1993), was an active member of the Gordonia youth movement in Sambir (near Lviv, now in Ukraine) prior to his immigration to

Palestine in 1932 at the age of eighteen. This is also where he met my grandmother, Bina Metzger. As the story was told in my family, my grandfather had every intention of joining his peers in establishing a new kibbutz upon their arrival to Palestine, but the leadership of Gordonia resolved—"unprecedently," my mother would emphasize—that a young man with intellectual talents such as his would serve the movement and its ideals better if he went to university and studied philosophy. True to his comrades' decree, my grandfather enrolled in the newly established Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he later became professor and provost. I am not sure whether and to what extent this story is to be trusted, and I am inclined to think that it was conjured at a later time when my grandfather was already a highly respected public intellectual who fiercely defended and promoted the heritage and values of the Labor Movement. I suspect that Gordonia wanted to claim him as one of its own but needed to explain, somewhat apologetically, why he did not quite live up to its ideal. It is very possible that my grandfather's peers genuinely liked him but did not think he would make a particularly good kibbutz member; it is also possible that my grandfather was simply more compelled by academia than by kibbutz life. One way or another, my grandfather remained true to the kibbutz as an ideal throughout his entire life and traveled to Hulda, the kibbutz established by his peers from Gordonia, every year. He was not the only philosophy professor who doubled as a kibbutz member in their fantasies; his mentor, philosophy professor Hugo Bergmann (1883–1975), apparently trained himself to be a cobbler in anticipation of the day (which never came) when he would join a kibbutz.

Out of about 100,000 members of Zionist-socialist youth movements in Europe up until 1939, about 20,000 immigrated to Palestine. Some of them joined existing kibbutzim or formed new ones, but most of them spent a short time in a kibbutz—or no time at all—and continued to settle in other places in Palestine. As I found out while researching for this book, this was the story of my other grandfather, Yosef Balberg, who also came to Palestine in 1932; he spent only a few months in a kibbutz before abandoning it and settling in Jerusalem. My grandfather was an avid socialist and a union organizer throughout his life, but as it turns out, he preferred to organize urban factory workers rather than live in an agricultural commune.

The disappointed kibbutz leaders registered that quite a few of those immigrants never had any intention of living in a kibbutz; they were just looking for a ticket out of Europe, where most Jews lived in poverty and squalor and in constant fear of antisemitic attacks. By the mid-1930s, the British government severely restricted the number of entry certificates it was willing to grant Jews immigrating to Palestine for fear of upsetting the balance of Jews in proportion to Arabs in the region. It became almost impossible for Jews to enter Palestine independently, but young people without families who were sponsored by the kibbutzim received certificates more easily. Association with a kibbutz allowed people to gain entry to Palestine, to secure a place to live in the new land while

they were getting their bearings, and then to move on. Many, however, genuinely tried kibbutz life with every intention of dwelling in a kibbutz permanently but could not adjust, whether physically, socially, or both. The leaders blamed this on insufficient training back in Europe as well as on the "low human quality" of some of the youth movements' members, who were too mired in poverty and ignorance to truly develop correct ideological propensities and revolutionary consciousness.

But even those new immigrants who did join the kibbutzim and choose to stay in them often suffered discrimination and were met with a cold shoulder. As keen as the kibbutzim were to expand and to grow, they also maintained the suspicion and unwelcoming attitude toward outsiders and newcomers that is typical of small, closely knit communities. Even a society that prides itself on being classless quickly develops hierarchies, and kibbutzim in those days featured fairly clear hierarchies: at the top were the founders, the Second or Third Aliyah immigrants who established the kibbutz; beneath them, the Palestine-born youngsters who joined through local youth movements; beneath them, emigrants from Germany and Western Europe who were usually highly educated and fervently idealistic; and at the bottom, newcomers from Poland and Eastern Europe and from Middle Eastern countries, few as the latter were. The hierarchy was manifest not only in small day-to-day interactions—for example, who got to sit with whom at which table in the dining hall—but also in the assignment of roles and jobs within the kibbutz, and more generally in being treated like one's opinion, input, or contribution were of value. As one member of Beit HaShita who joined in 1935 related:

> Whatever we did was always wrong. There was always someone there to scold us and push us to the side so that things would be done by someone who knew better. It was not intentional or malicious. There really were exceptional people here with outstanding skills, including those born in Palestine who came first, who were then joined by excellent intellectual forces from abroad, and they took up all the positions steering the kibbutz and setting the tone. Roles passed on from one member to another in the sphere above us, but we couldn't penetrate that layer. Many of us felt inferior for a very long time. Eventually, only after others burnt out, members of my group started to be assigned roles as well.[60]

As a frequent visitor to Degania in my childhood, I never realized that such hierarchies existed from the very inception of the kibbutz to the present day. Everyone there seemed to belong so firmly, so completely, and to be at ease with everyone else. I did not know that my mother's surrogate parents, Berta and Yosef, harbored tremendous resentment and hurt over the way they were treated by the established members when they joined Degania in 1936, and that Berta even left the kibbutz for three months in the beginning because she could not fit in. Only after reading extensively about the history of the kibbutz in general and of Degania

in particular do I understand sentences that flew by me as a kid, such as a hissed, "Well, *they* are from the Baratz family," meaning, "They are from the founders' royalty."

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While kibbutz members were directing significant resources toward educating and training those who would, ideally, choose to join the kibbutz as adults, the jewel of the kibbutz's crown was, of course, those born and raised there, the children of the founders who were demigods in their parents' eyes—and certainly in their own eyes. The 1930s were the years when communal education turned from a small-scale necessity into a movement-wide ideology with firmly established doctrines, principles, and manifestos. Although cherished and even worshipped to some extent, kibbutz children were in many ways lab animals; whatever method the kibbutz ideologues deemed to be the best way to raise courageous, proud, and hardworking socialists was tried out on them, sometimes briefly and sometimes continuously. Among the more short-lived practices was the habit of making children sleep on plywood rather than on matrasses so as to straighten their physical and metaphorical backs. Among the longer-lived practices was the separation of parents from their children for most hours of the day and night, beginning at birth. Kibbutz children were brought to the "babies house" right after they were born, and their mothers came to nurse them every four hours. As the babies grew up, they moved with their age group from one children's house to another, usually living four in a room. Each age group had a designated caretaker who made all the decisions about the children. Children ate, bathed, played, and slept in the children's house and spent only a few hours every afternoon with their biological parents. Kibbutz children were well trained; they would say, "I'm going to my house" when they meant the children's house and, "I'm going to my room" when they meant their parents' room.

Although kibbutz children were expected to be independent, resilient, and hardworking from the moment they were born, it would be misguided to see the kibbutz as a modern-day Sparta where children were expected to be small adults and were given no space to play and explore. It is striking to see how much thought and love were put into designing play areas for children where they could dig and get dirty and build castles in the sand, how caretakers made sure that children could keep the "treasures" they collected on their trips such as rocks and seashells and leaves, and what efforts were made to beautify the children's houses with bright colors and flowers at a time when the adults were still struggling with the basics.

Endless conversations and conferences were held to determine what children should and should not study, what stories they should or should not be told, and whether the organizing principle of their education should be the kibbutz itself or broader topics—for example, should they learn about plants in general or learn

specifically about cotton, citrus, and sugar beet because this is what their kibbutz was growing? The issue of Jewish education was especially controversial as kibbutz members of different persuasions oscillated between adamant secularism and Jewish sentimentality. Miriam Singer, who was a preschool teacher in Degania from 1925 to 1950, related the following anecdote:

> We had pedagogical conferences where it was decided that we were not to tell biblical stories to children unless we acted judiciously and did not mention the name of God. On this matter, too, the children taught me more than books or experts had ever taught me. Once, after someone had broken his leg, one of the children asked me, "Miriam, where does man actually come from that he breaks so easily?" To avoid the delicate topic, I said, "He is born." "No," the boy explained to me, "I meant where did the first human being come from?" While I was thinking how I should respond, his fellow answered, "He came from apes," but one girl immediately protested: "That's not true, God created him." [...] By now the entire group was standing around and they all looked at me with expecting eyes. I told them, "There is a very ancient book that says that God created human beings, but there is another book that says that man came from apes, and no one knows which is true." I was tempted to see what would resonate more with the children's psyches and conducted a survey. "What do you think? And you? And you?"—of course, most votes were given to our heavenly father. I then got up, took the Bible off the shelf, and started telling them about the creation of the world. And I did not leave out the creator.[61]

Not all kibbutz adults were willing to grant children the comfort of a divine figure. Assaf Inbari relates a story from his kibbutz, Afikim, of a young child who walked in the dark from the children's house to her parents' room, terrified by the howling winds and jackals and the pitch-black evening. "God, please protect me," she whispered constantly as she was walking. When she arrived at her parents' room and told them that God protected her, her father explained to her that there was no God. She made her way back to the children's house alone, surrounded by darkness and jackals, without God.[62]

With the first generation of kibbutz children reaching adolescence, regional high schools were established—in accordance with the ideological lines separating the different kibbutz organizations from one another—that brought together teenagers from several kibbutzim into one institution. In most kibbutzim, high school students continued to live in their own kibbutz and would walk (or later, be bussed) to the school, but in kibbutzim aligned with HaShomer HaTza'ir—ever the fundamentalists—the educational institution was effectively a boarding school where the students lived, worked, and conducted a fully independent social life as of the age of twelve. The first educational institution of HaShomer HaTza'ir, Shomria, was established in kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek in 1931 and brought

together youth from multiple kibbutzim who all roomed together in one big house. The guiding notion of the institution was "a republic of youth." The students were to take full charge of every aspect of their lives with the adults on the premise intervening only in matters of safety, health, and finances. This was set to be a full-on preparation for kibbutz life, including the administrative structures of committees, votes, self-surveillance, debates, work dispatchers, and rotating assignments.

Children in Shomria in the early 1940s.

While the institution ultimately aimed to generate hardworking laborers, it also championed creativity, curiosity, love of learning, and appreciation of art and music, attempting to provide the kibbutz's youth with a humanistic education in the deepest sense of the word. "Our youth was in need of multifaceted education that did not merely deliver knowledge and tidbits of information but rather saw human beings as whole entities," wrote Shmuel Golan, one of the leading

educators of HaShomer HaTza'ir. "[We needed] a modern, well-equipped school that was able to instill in young people love for values of science and culture [...] A vibrant society of youth, guided by adults of great spirit, who were able to turn social and national ideas into a source of personal, intimate experience for young people."[63] Shomria and the likes of it were oxymoronic entities: institutions for aristocratic proletariat education. In this respect, they were very different from Soviet schools that emphasized discipline, uniformity, memorization, and constant testing—even though the educational theorists that heavily influenced kibbutz pedagogues were all Marxist.

Kibbutz institutions prided themselves on the quality of education they were giving their students—in many ways rightly so—but this education was definitively idiosyncratic. It was calibrated entirely toward the creation of ideal-type kibbutz members and was of limited utility outside this framework. It was customary for kibbutz high school students to study only four days a week and work for two days, and the school day usually ended around noon. In their final year of high school, students only studied for six months and worked the rest of the time. When Tamar Reiner (born 1933) of kibbutz Gan Shmuel finished her fifth year at Shomria, her kibbutz made a somewhat unusual decision about her future. Tamar, who showed a remarkable aptitude for scientific subjects, was to take her sixth and final year at a regular high school in Tel Aviv and get an official high school diploma (which Shomria did not provide). She would then study chemistry in the university so that she could eventually work as a chemist in the kibbutz's juice factory. When Tamar matriculated in a high school in Tel Aviv, she had to take some tests—a culture shock in and of itself, since she had never taken a test before in her life—and she failed most of them. It turned out that her knowledge in the sciences was three years behind that of her new classmates. Ever the dutiful and responsible girl she was raised to be, she set out to catch up and succeeded, amazed by the fact that she was now expected—and able—to do nothing other than study all day long.[64] She eventually passed her tests and matriculated in the university, but after one year of studies her kibbutz informed her that she was no longer to be a chemist. Instead, she was to return to the kibbutz and start working as a teacher, which she did for thirteen years. Eventually, Tamar Reiner left her kibbutz and became one of the pioneers of K-12 science education on Israel's public television.

There was no gender-based separation in Shomria. Boys and girls lived together, four in a room, and they showered together. There were three common showers: one set of showers for the younger students, one set of showers for the older students, and one shower "for girls in a special condition"—which of course allowed everyone to know that girls who walked into that shower were on their periods. As with everything else, there was an ideology behind this decision. In HaShomer HaTza'ir, which heralded sexual purity as one of the commandments that its members should live by (alongside abstinence from alcohol and tobacco), it was assumed that normalizing and naturalizing nudity and physical closeness

among peers of opposite sexes would de-eroticize the relationship and actually lead to abstinence. A boy and a girl who live together and shower together would consider each other like brother and sister and would be steered away from sexual fantasies or interactions. Some of those who were raised this way say that the experiment was widely successful—so successful that they later had difficulty forming intimate relationships with anyone and became sexually and emotionally stunted. Others say that this experiment failed entirely and that these educational institutions were sexual pressure cookers where erotic escapades, wanted and unwanted, took place all the time.

During the six years that the students spent at Shomria, they saw their parents just three times a year. When asked if she was ever homesick, Tamar Reiner responded, "It's the kind of thing you won't even admit to yourself. When I read letters I wrote during those years, it is evident that we were homesick [...] but life here was so full, so rich."[65] It is notable that Tamar uses the first-person plural ("when I read my letters, it is evident that *we* were homesick"), a form of speech that typifies the collective mindset that was instilled in children of the kibbutzim and that was used almost exclusively in the texts that they produced about themselves in their youth. The kibbutzim cultivated a strong sense of "we" not just by having children and young adults spend most hours of the day with their peers but also by driving home the message, despite the explicit rhetoric of equality, that they were better than all others—certainly better than those growing up in the cities. Joining such groups as an outsider, whether as a new immigrant or as a newcomer from the city, was notoriously difficult. But being an insider, bound by endless expectations and by a strong sense that one had to prove one's virtues and live up to one's standing as the salt of the earth at every single moment, was not easy either. In Tamar Reiner's words:

> The "Children's Society" was for years—certainly until I finished my studies at the age of eighteen but even thereafter, when I became an educator—a world unto itself. An institution rife with contradictions, my feelings about which are still very mixed: a memory of an independent, thrilling life, rich and full, alongside equality-directed coercion and stifling peer pressure. Every night the same madness: What do all the other children think of me? Am I alright? Did I meet my obligations? Did I do my best? How can one tell? [...] I was in a competition against myself, and I was always failing. It was not until I left the kibbutz and got my first paycheck that I was relieved of that inner tyrant.[66]

Appreciation of art and culture and keen efforts to bring color and beauty into the community's everyday life did not end with the kibbutz's children. If my descriptions above made the kibbutz seem like a joyless place where all pleasures

are shunned, this impression must be corrected immediately by noting that the kibbutzim were founts of extraordinary cultural creation of all sorts—literature, music, visual arts, theatre, and dance—and in this regard they left a lasting mark on Israeli society.

From its very inception, the ethos of the kibbutz was that arduous manual labor would not suppress human creative forces but rather unleash them. Released from material existential concerns and reinvigorated by the return to nature, kibbutz members in those early decades were expected to live up to their highest human potential. Somehow, despite the long working hours and the trying physical conditions, many of them did. Creative endeavors were encouraged and supported as long as they were meant to serve the collective and not the individual and as long as they did not jeopardize one's other commitments as a kibbutz member. For example, Naomi Shemer (1930–2004) of kvutzat Kinneret, who would become one of Israel's most popular and prolific composers and lyricists, was recognized as a musical prodigy when she was just three years old. She was allowed to take piano lessons (for which she had to walk in blistering heat or in rain and mud to adjacent kibbutzim) on the condition that she would play the piano for the entire kibbutz every Sabbath and on kibbutz celebrations. Naomi was charged with this task from the time she was six. The piano belonged to the kibbutz, of course, so Naomi had to get up very early in the morning or stay up late at night to practice since the piano was occupied by others throughout much of the day. In 1948, Naomi was allowed to study classical music professionally in Tel Aviv—the kibbutz assembly voted on this, and the decision passed by a slim majority—and when she returned, she was charged with an appropriate task for her exceptional skills: teaching music to the kibbutz's toddlers.

Collectively oriented creative enterprises served to enrich and enliven kibbutz members' everyday lives, which could otherwise be monotonous and dreary. At a time when everything was functional and basic, art and music were direly necessary to inject life not only with pleasure but also with meaning. Through visual, literary, and theatrical endeavors, the kibbutz told its own story to itself and to others. It did so on the annual celebration of each kibbutz's founding day; it did so on the most important holiday for all socialists, May 1 (in the kibbutzim of HaShomer HaTza'ir November 7, the day of the Russian Revolution, was equally important), and it did so on the Jewish holidays. The latter were especially important because they presented kibbutz members with the unique challenge of reclaiming traditional festivals that were laden with religious meaning and recasting them in the spirit of secular Zionist socialism. This challenge was met by going back to the Hebrew Bible, which presented a paradigm for a Jewish agricultural society residing on its own land—still uncorrupted by clerical and rabbinic institutions and still undegenerated by life as a persecuted minority in exile—that allowed them to draw a direct line from the Bible to the kibbutz.

To that end, hundreds of new songs were written, classical Jewish texts were adapted, and elaborate choreographies were created. The festival of Shavuot, for

example, which for a very long time was an unremarkable holiday marking the passage of seven weeks since Passover, and which was also loosely associated with the giving of the Torah, was revived in the kibbutzim by putting heavy emphasis on biblical facets of this holiday that were mostly ignored in the Jewish tradition: reaping and gathering the first fruits. This festival culminated in the kibbutzim in a procession of all the year's first fruits, carried by the members who cultivated each crop, and with a dance of the kibbutz's young maidens wearing white dresses and carrying sheaves of wheat. The first fruits would be given to a representative of the Jewish National Foundation who would exchange the kibbutz's produce for a sum of money—replicating the delivery of first fruits to the Jerusalem Temple in ancient times.

The festival of Passover was in many ways the kibbutz's window dressing. This was the time when many of those who lived in towns and cities went to visit their relatives in the kibbutzim to witness the spectacle of a festival celebration taking place not in the intimacy of one's house but in a communal dining hall filled with hundreds and sometimes thousands of people. Yehuda Sharett of kibbutz Yagur created what came to be known as the Kibbutz Haggadah—a new version of the traditional Passover Haggadah (the liturgy of the ritual Passover meal) that has been in place since the Middle Ages. Whereas the traditional Haggadah told the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt by God, the Kibbutz Haggadah utilized some of those motifs to tell the story of the Jews' revival in their land in the twentieth century. The liberation from slavery became both the Zionist liberation from oppressive exile and the socialist liberation of all working people.

Passover seder in Gan Shmuel, 1947.

The effect of hundreds—sometimes thousands—of people singing and dancing together was intoxicating. Avraham Balaban of kibbutz Hulda reflected back on the kibbutz holidays he attended in his childhood:

> These were moments when your individual self was swallowed by a greater sense of a collective self, a collective self that is also better and more just and more beautiful than anything else [...] These were mere moments, but they were wonderful moments. Since then, I cannot sing or dance with other people because it is such a pale imitation of the ecstatic experience of those days. [...] It wasn't only togetherness but a togetherness in which all promises of a life of substance suddenly came true.[67]

"First Harvest" procession in Gan Shmuel, circa 1935.

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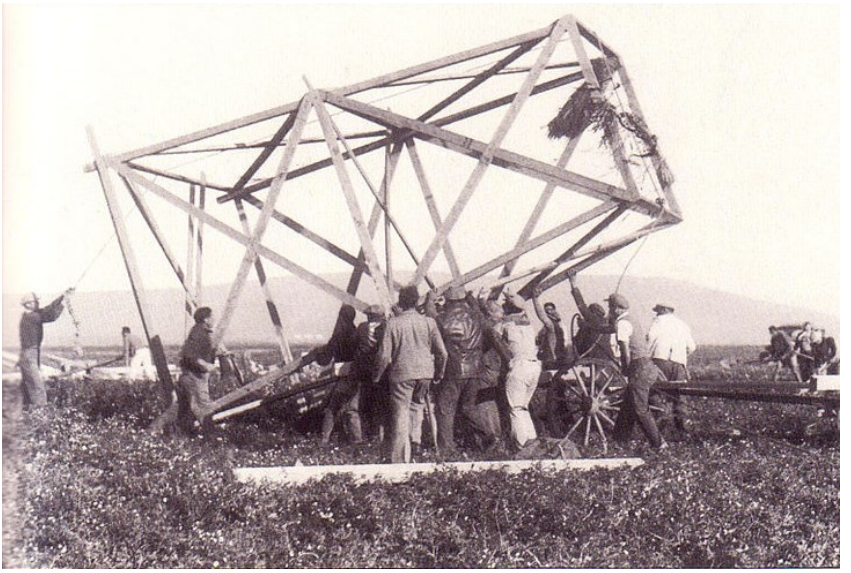
Outside of the kibbutz's busy and brimming bubble, tensions and hostility between Jews and Arabs in Palestine were rising steadily. These tensions were set in motion following the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which stated Britain's intention to support the establishment of "a national home for the Jewish People in Palestine." At the time, Jews constituted about one eighth of the overall population in Palestine. The idea that the Jews, as a small minority, would acquire ownership of a land mostly populated by Arabs through the support of an imperial European force was understandably infuriating to the Arab Palestinian leadership. Moreover, the Balfour declaration blatantly contradicted the promise that Sir Henry McMahon, the British high commissioner to Egypt, gave to Hussein bin Ali, the sharif of Mecca, in the midst of World War I: to establish an Arab kingdom that

would span from the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean. In the course of the war the British were desperate to defeat the Ottomans and to establish a stronghold in the Middle East in order to secure the passage to India; now that they had dominion over much of the Middle East, they began to realize what a mess they have gotten themselves into in Palestine. The Jews made demands that the British honor the Balfour declaration and support their national cause, whereas the Arabs made demands that the British protect their status as the majority in the country. Violent conflicts between Jews and Arabs took place periodically, with two especially brutal and bloody episodes of large-scale attacks on Jews, one in 1921 and one in 1929. But in the 1930s, the conflict escalated dramatically.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 led to a massive departure of Jews from Europe in a wave of immigration that came to be known as the Fifth Aliyah. This was the largest wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine yet; between 1933 and 1939 more than 250,000 Jews came to Palestine, thus tripling the size of the Jewish population. By 1935, Jews were already one-third of the overall population in Palestine, and Jewish settlements—primarily kibbutzim—were established on lands where Arab Palestinian farmers previously lived. These lands were purchased from wealthy landowners who were seeking a profit, and the tenant villagers who lived on these lands but had no legal claim to them often had to leave. The prospect of an independent Jewish state that would dispossess the Arab Palestinians altogether was beginning to seem very real, and Arab Palestinian leadership decided that it was time to take extreme measures. In January 1936 the Arab Palestinians declared a general strike, refusing to work for or sell anything to the British or to the Jews until their demands—ending the British mandate, banning all Jewish immigration, and rescinding the Balfour declaration—were met. Terror attacks and violent actions followed and continued for months. Palestine was on fire and on the brink of economic collapse.

The British realized that this could not go on and convened a special commission, chaired by Lord Peel, to study the situation in Palestine and to make recommendations. In July 1937, the Peel Commission recommended that Palestine be divided into two separate states with some areas (primarily Jerusalem) remaining under British supervision. This came to be known as the Partition Plan. As soon as the Peel Commission convened, it became evident to Zionist leadership that the territory of the future Jewish state, whenever it would be established, would be determined in accordance with the places where Jews were already settled. In order to ensure that the future state would encompass as much territory as possible, new settlements had to be established quickly and efficiently. Moreover, Jews had to settle in areas that were currently populated by Arabs—sometime very hostile Arabs. What manner of settlement is most suitable for this task, and who is most equipped to carry it out? The answer to both questions, of course, was the kibbutz.

From that point on, the national mission of the kibbutzim was not only to prove that Jews could live and even thrive independently in Palestine but also to assert a Jewish territorial claim over it in the most concrete fashion: by holding on to a spot, defending it fiercely, and leaving it only over the members' dead bodies. And there would be many dead bodies. The Jews believed that they were purchasing lands legally and fairly from the lands' owners and making them truly their own by plowing, sowing, tilling, and reaping—in accordance with the Ottoman law that the earliest pioneers followed, which allowed whoever took over an uncultivated piece of land and cultivated it for one year to claim ownership of it the following year. The Arab Palestinians feared that the Jews were working steadily and aggressively to take over a land that was not theirs, where they were usurpers at the pleasure of the colonizing British empire.



Putting together the watchtower in kibbutz Sha'ar HaGolan, 1937.

Tel Amal was the first kibbutz to be established through an ingenious operation of expediated construction. So as to defend itself from attacks, Tel Amal needed a watchtower and a stockade, the preparation of which would take a great deal of time that no one had. The orchestrators of the operation suggested building the tower and the stockade somewhere else and then bringing them disassembled to the new spot so that the kibbutz could be put together in a single day. In December of 1936, members of the Tel Amal founding group, accompanied by volunteers from other kibbutzim in the area, drove with all the construction materials from Beit Alfa to the new spot and put the new kibbutz together before dark. This method, which acquired the name *homah umigdal* (wall and tower),

was replicated in the establishment of no fewer than fifty-two new kibbutzim between 1936 and 1939. It is worth noting that five of those fifty-two were a new specimen of kibbutzim—namely, religious kibbutzim—whose members considered a lifestyle of commitment to the Torah and to rabbinic tradition as the path through which true communalism and socialism could be best achieved. These groups were initially ridiculed and looked down upon, and their requests to be allocated land were turned down over and over again until the urgent need for more settlements in remote and dangerous places allowed them to become part of the story of the kibbutz movement.

At a time when it seemed like kibbutzim were already settling into a routine, and the valiant struggles of the founders to create something out of nothing were being replaced with a more stable, if still abstemious, existence, the younger members of the kibbutzim now had their own opportunity to be *the first*. The new settlement project was experienced as a reawakening and as an opportunity to live through a beginning, through the dawn of a new day, once again. When Zalman Chen, a young farmer, heard about the establishment of Tel Amal, he wrote a song that quickly became hugely popular, capturing this sentiment exactly:

Behold, look and see—
How great is this day, this day!
Fire burns in our breasts,
And the plow once again runs through the field.
Shovel, pickaxe, hoe, and pitchfork,
Come together in a storm—in a storm!
And once again we set the earth ablaze
With a green flame![68]

The kibbutz movement was now associated not only with a pure and utopian lifestyle and with the dream of Jewish self-subsistence but also with heroism and self-sacrifice on a national scale. In particular, kibbutz Hanita in the western Galilee, which was established in 1938, became the ultimate icon of the new phase in the Zionist struggle. Hanita was so isolated that it could not be reached by vehicles. The volunteers who participated in the operation had to carry everything, including the stockade and the tower, in their hands and on their shoulders for a distance of about two kilometers from where the trucks were parked, through thick brush—and most of them walked back and forth more than twenty times. On the very first night, two of Hanita's founders were shot and killed. The perseverance of Hanita under ongoing attacks was to be replicated in the coming decade in many kibbutzim, both old and new. The kibbutz became a myth larger than any reality.

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There was the kibbutz in 1939, a bundle of paradoxes: creative and conformist, seeking intellectual and artistic fulfillment but also dismissive of it, driven by universal ideals but utterly parochial, proudly Jewish but (mostly) anti-religious, egalitarian but hierarchical, seeking to expand but shunning outsiders, self-congratulating and self-critical. These paradoxes speak not only to the complexity of the endeavor in and of itself but also to the weight of the expectation that the kibbutz was shouldering at the time—the expectation that it would breed the best possible human beings that have ever existed, who could conquer any task and serve as a role model for all of humanity. And that weight was only about to get heavier.

4

Wait for Us, My Country

1940–1949

At a midnight hour in vanquished Berlin,
The two of us marching down Unter den Linden,
You'll be so moved and will tell me,
"Amnon, look! How good that we've come here,
Our eyes watching as our enemies fall,
But recently, I do not know...
I miss home so badly!
The sound of children,
The ringing of flocks,
The smell of the orchards [...]"
And I will respond:
"We will surely return [...]
And in our little house, as the sun will be setting,
You'll be singing our son to sleep with a lullaby,
And you'll tell him in your sweet voice
That in the entire wide, faraway world,
There isn't a place a lovely, as delightful,
As our little home on the shore of the Kinneret.[69]

In 1944, when thousands of Jews from Palestine were serving in the British Army in an effort to support the Allied Forces in World War II, the British government granted permission to form a Jewish entertainment troupe as part of the ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association). The troupe traveled to bases where large numbers of Jewish soldiers were stationed—primarily in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt—in order to raise the soldiers' morale with catchy, uplifting Hebrew songs and skits before they set out for occupied Italy. In

Rome, the troupe debuted its greatest hit, "All Roads Lead to Rome," a duet that featured a dialogue between two kibbutz members from Palestine, Ruth and Amnon, who volunteered for the British Army and found themselves in Rome. Ruth and Amnon, young and in love, marvel at the Arch of Titus and St. Peter's Cathedral, and they fantasize about eventually getting to Berlin once it's defeated and occupied, but all the while they long to go back home to their kibbutz, which—they assure us—is the most beautiful place in the world.

It is not at all surprising that when the troupe wanted to bring a sense of home to the deployed soldiers, it did so through the iconic image of two young and beautiful kibbutz members—kibbutz members who, like them, volunteered for the British Army since that was the call of the hour. The kibbutz was perceived and presented in those years not only as the concentrated essence of everything that Jews were trying to build in Palestine but also as an antidote of sorts to the horrendous fate of Jews in Europe. The kibbutz's children, who were now old enough to fight for and defend the country of which they were natives, were heralded as the ultimate new Jews: rooted in their land, confident in their identity, comfortable in their skins, ready for all. And yet, despite the propagandistic naïvety of the song, I find it oddly moving, especially as I think of the troupe singing this song in front of the survivors from the camps that slowly began to gather in Italy in 1945. I can only imagine what it was like to tell people who have lost their entire world about the desire to go back home.

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World War II presented the Jews in Palestine with a new kind of threat, more ominous than they had ever experienced: the threat of takeover by Nazi Germany and its allies. The growing animosity toward the British authorities—who were restricting immigration to Palestine at a time when Jews in Europe were desperately trying to get out—was set aside in the face of the war. As mentioned, many Jews, including numerous kibbutz members, joined the British Army; toward the end of the war, there was even a designated Jewish unit called the Jewish Infantry Brigade Group. In addition, the British funded and trained volunteer units of local Jews for guerilla warfare, units which received the name *plugot mahatz* (strike companies), or in short: Palmach. The recruits for these special units came mostly, although not exclusively, from among the kibbutzim.

As Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel was successfully advancing through the North African desert with German and Italian troops, Palestinian Jewry was panicking. The British government made clear that if the Wehrmacht were to invade Palestine, British forces would retreat to Iraq, and Palestine would be left to fend for itself. Some Jews escaped; others prepared poison so they could kill themselves when the time came; some went to neighboring Arab villages and asked the locals to raise their children should something happen to them. There was talk of "Masada on Mount Carmel"—a final fortress (such as Masada was, if

only mythically, in the Great Revolt against Rome in the first century CE) where Jews would barricade themselves and fight until the last of them dropped. The chances of survival in the event that the Nazis would invade, everyone knew, were zero. David Schmetterling, a member of Degania, wrote a startling scene in his diary in 1941, imagining what the last night of Degania would be like:

> The Germans are approaching our gates. Degania is condemned to death. We asked the soldiers of the Devil for permission to hold one last prayer. We all wore our Sabbath clothes. The tables were arranged as usual for Sabbath meals: tablecloths and flowers [...] Yosef Baratz stood up to speak: Our lives were wonderful. They were worthy of us having lived them. Today we shall die for them. We are all sitting, embracing each other [...] The heart is rejoicing and secretly weeping. A farewell to Degania and to the land of the living. Suddenly they call us, the time has come! We get up and we kiss, the German soldiers command: Out! [...]
>
> This image grips me and does not let go. Should we be so fortunate to go through the Second World War unharmed, and even if the arm of Evil will break—let us still remember this picture.[70]

In 1942, after the decisive Second Battle of El Alamein that turned the tide in the North African front, the threat of Nazi conquest was largely removed from Palestine, and Britain no longer saw any need to support the Jewish fighters of the Palmach. Zionist leadership, however, did not want to give up on those elite squads, which were certain to play a crucial part in the battle for Jewish independence, which now seemed imminent and inevitable. Yitzhak Tabenkin came up with the solution: the Palmach would be housed in the kibbutzim, which would fund it, lodge it, feed it, and support it, and in return the Palmach fighters would work in the kibbutzim where they resided. In other words, the Zionist task of settlement and agrarian production on the one hand, and the Zionist task of defense and the creation of an armed force on the other hand, would become fully intertwined—in the kibbutzim. The kibbutz now had an army, and in some ways, the kibbutz *was* the army.

The Palmach was an odd mixture. In some respects it was an organization devoid of any formality, a non-military military: there were no insignia of rank and no ceremonial marches, and commanders and trainees spent the night singing around a bonfire together and occasionally stealing chickens from the kibbutz's coop for a late-night feast. Its spirit was one of independence, self-reliance, and no nonsense—very much in keeping with kibbutz culture. This simple, youthful, authentic, no-frills aspect of the Palmach is what is usually remembered in Israeli lore. The Palmach was mythicized in its own short lifetime (it existed for only seven years, from 1941 to 1948), and at the heart of the myth stood the contrast between the magnitude of the Palmach's undertakings and its modest and informal modes of conduct.

At the same time, the Palmach was also created in the image of the Soviet Red Army. Its soldiers were taught to sing Russian fight songs, and the book that every Palmach warrior carried in their backpack was Alexander Bek's *Volokolamsk Highway* (translated into Hebrew as *Panfilov's Men*), a book about a Soviet infantry unit in World War II. One of the notable leadership positions in the Palmach, imported directly from the Red Army, was that of the *politruk*—an educational-political officer who was charged with "ideological guidance"—that is, indoctrinating soldiers with socialist-nationalist creeds, inspiriting them with heartfelt speeches, and elevating their morale with invigorating songs and heroic stories. The decision to include women in the Palmach's fighting forces was justified through appeal to the Soviet Army, where many thousands of women served in combat units. This red tint was due in large part to the influence of several charismatic veterans of the Soviet Army who did not actively fight in the Palmach but played a decisive role in conceiving and shaping it. But the Soviet enthusiasm was also the direct result of the Palmach's immersion in the kibbutzim, which always had an affinity for the Soviet Union, and especially so during World War II when the Soviet Union fought valiantly—and much of the time singlehandedly—against the Nazis.

The Palmach's insistence on and pride in doing its own thing while also taking its inspiration from the great Soviet mother is emblematic of the dual loyalty that many kibbutzim developed during those years—to the local homeland on the one hand and to the "World Revolution" spearheaded by the Soviet Union on the other hand. Although the kibbutz movements (to different extents) were not fans of the totalitarian aspects of the Soviet regime, they did consider the Soviet Union as proof of concept for the implementation of large-scale revolutionary socialism, and they did not wish to sever their ideological connection with it. Now that the Soviets were championed as "the good guys" of World War II (even though they were allied with Hitler for its first two years, which is easy to forget), the kibbutz felt justified in its love.

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As the established kibbutzim were housing and sustaining the Palmach warriors, new kibbutzim continued to be founded. The widespread settlement efforts of the late 1930s continued into the 1940s, targeting the most remote regions in the north as well as Palestine's most desolate desert area, the Negev. The establishment of these kibbutzim was orchestrated from above by Zionist leadership with the proclaimed purpose of marking the border areas of the future independent Jewish state. These kibbutzim started their journey effectively as military strongholds, all the while also trying to turn the isolated and barren areas they settled in into livable homes.

Rachel Rabin-Ya'akov, who was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, settled with her fellows in the mountainous village of Manara in January 1943.

Manara is at the northwestern tip of the Galilee's panhandle, right on what would eventually become the border between Israel and Lebanon. Manara, it should also be noted, is one of very few kibbutzim that did not change the name of the Arab Palestinian village on which they settled. Although they were strongly encouraged to change the place's name to *Ramim* (heights), the kibbutz members insisted that they would not deny the place's history and its significance to the locals, with whom they tried to have good relations and mostly succeeded.

Rachel was trained as a morse code signaler and was in charge of radio communications, which were crucial for the secluded mountaintop settlement. There were no drivable roads leading to and from Manara, only narrow mountainous paths meant for herding goats. "We would bring water in barrels from the nearby Lebanese villages in quantities that were sufficient only for cooking," she recalled, "Once a week we would go to kibbutz Kefar Gila'di to shower. This was a two hour walk each way, and with all the sweat and the dust, we'd come back from the shower dirtier than when we got there."[71]

In a documentary film made in 2010, Rachel described what those first months in Manara were like. Her experiences sound very much like the experiences of the kibbutz founders in the 1920s except that extreme high temperatures were replaced with extreme low temperatures (relative to the Middle East, of course):

> I remember when we got here, we sat by the cliff, and it was so cold—it was terrible, and everything was…nothing. Stones and wind and a gorgeous view. […] On the one hand, it felt horribly lonely. We were completely alone on this bare mountain, struggling with daily existential things—we had no water or very little water, initially we lived in tents that flew away in the winter, then in shacks with rain coming through the walls […] But on the other hand, we felt like we were doing a great thing that had to be done. Many people left, which was the hardest ordeal of all for me—all those people who left and said, "We don't believe anything will ever come of this place."[72]

As Rachel was giving filmmaker Modi Bar-On a tour of Manara, she brought him to the kibbutz's fence overlooking Lebanon. "This is the village of Meiss El Jabal," she pointed out, "We used to have wonderful neighborly relations with them—there was no fence, of course—they would come to visit us, and we would go to visit them. Today the place is full of Hizballah. Apparently many of those buildings are funded by the Hizballah on the condition that they would benefit from them as well." Modi Bar-On gently commented, "The movement is funding settlement projects in the remote frontier." Rachel said, "That's right" and chuckled. [73]

Rachel Rabin-Ya'akov's quiet lament over the loss of friendly relations with the villages near Manara, which could no longer be sustained as the 1940s drew to their end, echoes the experience of many kibbutzim during those years. Because

of the piecemeal manner in which the Jewish National Foundation acquired lands, kibbutzim and Arab Palestinian villages resided in intimate proximity to each other. Since some proprietors sold their lands to Jews and some did not, whole areas in Palestine were checkered: a kibbutz next to an Arab village next to a kibbutz next to an Arab village and so on. The cities, too, had mostly mixed or semi-mixed populations. Animosity between Jews and Arab Palestinians had been growing steadily since the 1920s, but in the 1940s it reached a point of unceasing, daily violent conflicts more or less everywhere. The Arabs were enraged by the Jews' takeover of more and more lands and by their attempts to bring in thousands of Jewish immigrants—war refugees—in defiance of British restrictions, and they increasingly attacked Jewish settlements. The Jews, traumatized by the recent terror of the threat of a Nazi invasion and by early rumors about the fate of European Jewry, gradually shifted from a long-held defensive ethos to an offensive ethos, and they began to attack villages that were deemed hostile. By 1946, a cycle of attack, revenge, counter-revenge, and counter-counter-revenge was in full force. It was clear that a full-scale war was imminent.

The kibbutzim were preparing to fight for their survival. Their members were stashing arms and ammunition, which they acquired through a variety of legal and illegal channels, building shelters, training for combat, patrolling and ambushing, learning first aid and morse code, preparing reservoirs of food and fuel, making plans for evacuation of the elders and the children should the time call for it, and getting ready to kill and to die. The ideal of a communal way of life, which initially had strong pacifistic and universalistic elements to it, became completely entangled in an ethos of heroic warfare, national pride, military might, and courage under fire. Such were the times; not only the Soviet performance in World War II but also the resolute struggles of left-leaning Republicans in the Spanish Civil War provided models of socialism put to the test on the battlefield and fighting for its life until the end. A bombastic marching song that was widely sung during those years summarized this state of mind:

> *Wait for us, my country, in the paths of your mountains,*
> *Wait for us in your wide fields of bread.*
> *Greetings of the plow your young men brought you,*
> *But today they bear greetings upon their rifles!*[74]

Preoccupied with the rising tensions with Arab Palestinians, with growing resistance to the British regime, and also with internal strife among Jewish political factions, Zionist leadership was too busy to fully register what was happening to the Jews in Europe. It was only in 1943 that information started trickling in about the magnitude of the horror, about the thoroughness and scale of the genocide. Members of the kibbutzim, many of whom had left parents,

siblings, and friends behind in Europe, realized that their loved ones were gone forever, that they would probably never find out how they died, and that the world of their childhood—which they secretly missed and dreamed about sometimes—was eradicated. They did not dare mourn publicly or talk about the people they lost. It was incommensurate with the kibbutz's demand to leave behind the old and focus on the new, to "face the rising sun," as they called it. The challenges of the hour were too great to allow for private grief. Instead, the kibbutz had to focus on its loss as a movement—that is, on the elimination of the sizable human reservoir on which it was relying to expand and perpetuate itself. Some say that this was, in a very nascent way, the earliest beginning of the kibbutz's end; it was the moment when the leadership realized that the kibbutz would never achieve the scale and size of which they had been dreaming.

The kibbutz found one source of solace amid the unspeakable, inconceivable darkness of the extermination of European Jewry: the fact that the Jewish uprisings against the Nazis that broke out in several Jewish ghettos, primarily in Warsaw and in Vilnius, were all led by young people who belonged to the kibbutz's youth movements and training farms before the war. Those uprisings, although futile and set to fail from the start, served as proof that what the kibbutz had created in Europe was a different kind of Jews—a *better* kind of Jews, it was said openly—than the millions who went "like lambs to the slaughter" (a turn of phrase coined by Abba Kovner, the leader of the resistance in the Vilnius Ghetto). The kibbutz organizations were quick to embrace the rebels who survived the Holocaust and to commemorate the rebels who did not.

As for survivors who were not rebels, here things were more complicated. The kibbutzim certainly took it upon themselves to help bring Holocaust survivors to Palestine and to give them a home; they saw it as part of the national mission with which they were charged and for which they were to set an example. But members of the kibbutzim tended to look down upon those survivors who were neither socialists nor Zionists and whom they secretly—or not so secretly—blamed for what had happened to them. (Weren't they told over and over again that Jews had no future in Europe? Why did they not leave for Palestine when it was still possible?) Kibbutz members had no interest in hearing horror stories from people who would wake up every night screaming and who were taking more than their fair share of food and stashing it in their pockets. The presence of Holocaust survivors was troubling, stifling, and maybe too reminiscent of things they wanted to forget. In an assembly of the United Kibbutz Movement, suggestions were made to open separate dining halls and residences for Holocaust survivors "so the rest of us can continue to live our lives."[75] Tamar Reiner, who was a teenager when survivors started to arrive in her kibbutz, was racked with guilt over the way she and her friends treated them:

> When I studied in Mishmar HaEmek, four girls and one boy joined us in the eleventh grade, all of them refugees, survivors. [...] We were the youth of

> HaShomer HaTza'ir, optimistic, confident, certain that we had full command of our lives through the magical formulae of dialectical Marxism. With these few formulae all of reality was laid out at our feet, resolved and explained. Intellectually we suffered with the downtrodden of the world, but concrete suffering was, in truth, entirely foreign to us. And so, even though I knew about the inhumane suffering in the ghettos and the horrors of the concentration camps, I never associated those with the boys and girls who came to us. The "Holocaust" and the "six million" were one thing, but the individual, lonely, pale figures who arrived at our school were another. They were measured by the only criteria we were familiar with: school, social activity, conformity to our lifestyle. If they did not measure up, that was their problem. I did not feel an ounce of human empathy toward them. I don't think I ever cared to ask any of them what happened to them, what they'd been through, how they came to us, where their family was, how they felt now. [...] My only justification was the way the adults treated these individuals, which was not different from the way we treated them. But what was *their* justification?[76]

Of the several thousands of survivors who arrived in kibbutzim, only about one-third stayed. Many of them had a difficult time adjusting to the harsh discipline, to the all-demanding communality, and to the constant scrutiny. Some Holocaust survivors went as far as saying that living in a kibbutz was like living in a concentration camp all over again. But most difficult of all was the fact that no one wanted to listen to them, and when people did listen, they often refused to believe them. Avraham Tzoref (1924–2009) said that he spent the war thinking over and over again how he would tell people of what he had undergone, what words he would use to relate that all the Jews of his hometown were gone. For a long time, he felt like he was the last Jew on earth, the one who got to survive only so he could bear witness to what had happened. When he arrived in a kibbutz in 1947, his stories were met with disinterest and dismissal.[77] In retrospect, he knew he was traumatized by that response, but back then he let it go because, as he said, he "was overpowered by a will to forget, to start a new life."[78] Nina Vengrov (1927–2000), another member of the same kibbutz who suffered unspeakable tortures during the war, said with great sadness, "I don't know what would have happened if they had tried to understand us. Perhaps it's best that they did not. No one asked us anything. They dispatched us to work and told us to work. [...] And we didn't try to understand ourselves. That is how a year passed and another year and another year and another year, and every year it is getting harder, the memories from the Holocaust and the memories from after the Holocaust and the memories from the kibbutz."[79]

But while the kibbutz did not have high hopes for adult Holocaust survivors, it had much hope and directed much of its efforts toward children and youth who lost their parents in the war. *Aliyat HaNo'ar* (Youth Aliyah) was established in 1933

in Germany to help young adolescents (mostly thirteen to fifteen years old) immigrate to Palestine without their parents, back then exclusively on a voluntary basis and only after a period of preparation. In the course of World War II and in its aftermath, Aliyat HaNo'ar expanded its mission substantially and sought children of all ages who had no parents or whose parents could not care for them. These children often owned nothing but the clothes on their backs, received little to no education, and suffered devastating physical and mental injuries. Of about 15,000 children who came to Palestine through Aliyat HaNo'ar between 1946 and 1948, about two-thirds were placed in kibbutzim. For them, the kibbutz functioned in the deepest sense as what it was always supposed to be: a substitute for a family. For the kibbutz, these children provided an opportunity to facilitate and support what they believed in the most: rebirth, reinvention, and a restoration of youth.

Teenagers of Aliyat HaNo'ar getting off the boat, 1948.

That is how Havah, my surrogate mother from Degania, found her way to the kibbutz. Born in Aleppo, Syria, Havah was one of seven siblings. Her mother died when she was five years old, her father remarried, and the stepmother was not keen on raising her husband's children from his late wife. Havah's grandparents took the younger siblings with them—the older ones had already dispersed—and after a short stay in Beirut, they settled in Haifa. It quickly turned out, however, that the elderly grandparents could not care for the children. Havah was then put in the custody of Aliyat HaNo'ar and spent time in a couple of different kibbutzim until she found a more permanent home in kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, near the bay

of Haifa, so that she could be close to her older sisters. Her childhood and youth there were transformative, and her kibbutz family gave her a sense of security and belonging that she did not dare hope for in her childhood.

I did not know of Havah's back story when, as a child, as I read the book *The Little Queen of Sheba* by Leah Goldberg, which was first published in 1955. This was one of my favorite books when I was growing up. It tells the story of a group of children from Aliyat HaNo'ar, orphans and refugees, who were housed in kibbutz Ramat Yohanan, just like Havah. The book described how the children all got new Israeli first names and were gradually introduced to quintessential experiences of the kibbutz that were thoroughly foreign to them and that they initially resisted, such as performing plays, swimming, dancing, and taking long walks in nature—all in mixed company of boys and girls. While the main protagonist of the story was a girl named Yael, who did not adjust to life in the kibbutz and stubbornly kept to herself (although eventually she came around, of course), the character that stuck with me the most was that of Regina, a girl who spent the war years hidden in the house of a poor Polish couple who loved her dearly and were reluctant to give her away at the end of the war. During her first months in the kibbutz, Regina continued to say the Catholic prayers she was taught as a child. Eventually she was convinced to stop praying, but unlike the other children in the group, she was never willing to change her name. "This is what people who loved me called me," she said, "people who gave me the last piece of bread they had and who risked their lives for me."[80] Today I cannot read this sentence without choking up; as a child, I did not understand how a girl who lived in a kibbutz was willing to walk around with a name like Regina.

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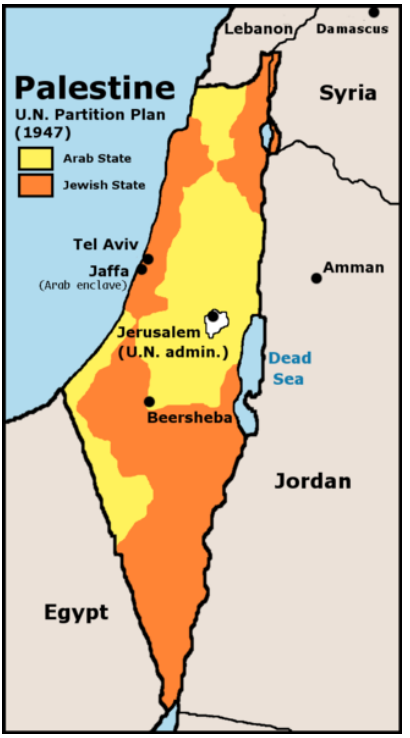
On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted on Resolution 181, the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, which proposed ending the British Mandate and establishing two separate states, a Jewish one and an Arab one. In dozens of photographs and newsreels from that night, the Jews of Palestine are seen huddled anxiously around radios, counting the votes with a beating heart until the final result was announced: thirty-three in favor, thirteen against, and ten abstentions. As soon as they realized that they now had their own state, people rushed to the streets and danced fervently until morning. In each and every place where people were dancing, so the story goes, one person was standing on the side saying, "Tonight we're dancing, but tomorrow there will be blood." The war started on November 30, 1947, and it did not officially end until July 1949.

Tabenkin, the leader of the United Kibbutz Movement, did not dance that night. Neither did Meir Ya'ari, the leader of HaShomer HaTza'ir. Both were opposed to the Partition Plan but for very different reasons. Ya'ari, the left-leaning Marxist, wanted a joint Arab-Jewish state in the spirit of a socialist brotherhood of nations, which would eventually join a world-wide Soviet alliance. Tabenkin, in

contrast, thought that the territory allocated to the future Jewish state was too small, but on a more profound level he resisted the very notion that the borders of the Jewish state would be determined by committees and diplomats; wherever Jews settle, he maintained, there the Jewish state shall be. For him, a sovereign Jewish state was premature; first, the Jewish people had to be transformed and acquire a completely new way of being, which could take generations. Both Ya'ari and Tabenkin, who were visionaries rather than politicians, realized that the Jewish state would not be commensurate with their utopian dreams. Both also realized, perhaps, that once their kibbutz kingdoms were subordinate to a sovereign state, they might not be able to run them entirely as they saw fit.



The UN Partition Plan for Palestine according to Resolution 181

Alongside the concern that the kibbutz's ambitions would be reined in by governmental structures and state mechanisms, there seems to have been an opposite concern as well: that top-down state authorities would eventually use coercive methods to enforce socialist ideals on the people, steering them away from the utopia instead of drawing them toward it. As partial to the Soviet Union as kibbutz leaders were, they were also wary of what it showcased: that the most noble ideas, when coupled with military, police, and judicial forces, could equal

totalitarianism. These leaders knew that the secret to the kibbutz's success and to the success of the Zionist project more broadly was its voluntary nature. How successful would those be when orchestrated and managed by the power of a sovereign state? "History has been kind to us," Tabenkin said, "in allowing us to realize [our goals] until now without a state [...] We have created a society in this country not though government but in spite of government, in opposition to Ottoman rule and in opposition to Mandatory rule. The same thing that happened to others happened to us: the desire for rule overpowered us."[81]

But the Jewish state was still an uncertain entity at the end of 1947 and the beginning of 1948, during the first months of the bloody and devastating war of many names—the War of Independence, or the War of Liberation, or the War of Palestine, or the *Nakba* (the Disaster). Until May 1948, fighting concentrated in cities where Jews and Arab Palestinians lived in close proximity as well as on the main roads. Isolated settlements, as many kibbutzim were at the time, could no longer be reached and were left without basic supplies. Manara was one of those kibbutzim, as Rachel Rabin-Ya'akov tells:

> Every caravan that attempted to reach Manara was attacked. We were disconnected. We had a bakery, so we baked our own bread. We had a chicken coop, so we slowly ate the chickens. The children were here until May [of 1948], and there were endless discussions and arguments on whether to keep the children here. Some members said that if we take the children away it would no longer be a home, and we may as well all just leave and let the army take over here; others said that we should be willing to risk ourselves but not our children. It was decided to let the children go, and the only way to do that was to carry them down the mountain on foot, between the village of Halsa on one side and the village of Hunin on the other side [...] As inconceivable as it sounds today, the mothers did not go with their children—not if they had any role in the kibbutz. Only the caretakers went with the children and a few mothers who had no designated role.[82]

The British Mandate was set to expire at midnight on May 15, 1948. David Ben-Gurion announced the establishment of the State of Israel at 4 p.m. on May 14. On the morning of May 15, military units from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan started a coordinated attack, which lasted until a ceasefire on June 10. Many of the kibbutzim, because of their location in border areas, were under heavy fire; a few of them did not survive. Two kibbutzim near the Syrian border, Masada and Sha'ar HaGolan, which were small and ill-equipped, could not endure the attacks. After two days without food or water, with heavy casualties and without any communication with the outside world, their members crawled to neighboring kibbutzim and collapsed, begging for help. They were treated harshly and accused of abandoning their posts. Their cowardly act, they were told, would set a bad example for all the other kibbutzim.

The Syrian tank at the entrance to Degania.

Degania was heavily raided by Syrian artillery fire to the point of near destruction and just barely made it. A Syrian tank arrived at its gates and was stopped at the last minute, apparently by a Molotov cocktail. I say "apparently" because there are no fewer than five different versions as to how the tank was actually stopped and by whom. In Degania, the official version is that a Molotov cocktail was thrown by Shalom Hochbaum, a Holocaust survivor who joined Degania two years earlier. One could not think of a more perfect, more emblematic story to illustrate the ethos of the State of Israel rising from the ashes of the destruction of European Jewry. It was enshrined in Degania's collective memory through a children's book titled *Hooray, We Won!*, written by kindergarten teacher Miriam Singer in 1951. Four other people, however, also took credit for saving Degania and with it the entire Jordan Valley on that day, but more recent studies suggest that the Syrian tank was actually not stopped by anyone but rather stopped on its own—apparently for fear of a trap inside the kibbutz–and was then set on fire.[83] One way or another, the tank still stands at the entrance to Degania as a dramatic monument to the foundational myths of Israel's war of independence: the few against the many, the brave of heart with their bare hands against monstrous military power, people defending their homes against invading foreign armies. These are the myths I grew up with ever since my mother took me, as a child, to see the tank at Degania's gates and to receive an impassioned lesson in Zionism. The story, as usual, was more complicated than that.

As kibbutzim were ravaged by the attacks, losing numerous members in battle and torn to the ground, Palestinian refugees from villages that were taken over by Israeli forces were making their way toward a life in exile or in refugee camps. Some were violently forced out of their villages; some left of their own accord for fear of what was coming. Along the roads one could see endless rows of men, women, and children carrying all their worldly possessions in bundles, marching toward wherever they thought might be a place of safety. There were also many who left all their belongings behind believing they would be back in their homes within a few days. Nazmiyya al-Kilani described how after four days of hiding she headed with her family to the port of Haifa, seeking refuge but determined to stay in Palestine. At some point on the journey her husband was captured by Israeli military forces, and she did not know whether he was dead or alive. She continued on with her three children and her mother:

> I carried my daughter Badur. Mother was almost without strength, she carried the little one, Eissam, and Anwar walked. I tied him to my apron, and we walked for miles. [...] Then we reached the port. There were boats and ships, people grabbed the children and threw them here and there, one into one boat and the other into another boat, and that's how mothers lost their children. I told them that we wanted to get to Akka [i.e., Acre, about thirty kilometers north of Haifa]. I didn't want to go to Tyre or somewhere else in Lebanon. Only to Akka. I thought we'd be gone a short time and come back. [...] The war then reached Akka. Every young man they found, whether armed or unarmed, the [Israeli soldiers] took him to the lighthouse area and there they shot him and threw his body in the sea. When the people of Akka heard all the shootings, they packed up their things and ran away.[84]

Nazmiyya stayed in Akka when it was almost entirely depleted of its Arab residents. Meanwhile her husband, who was deported to Lebanon by the Israeli military, believed that his entire family was dead and continued on to settle in Syria. In 1949, Nazmiyya asked a radio station in Haifa that regularly read out messages from Palestinians who were searching for their lost relatives to broadcast a message regarding her husband: "I am Nazmiyya Muhyi Al-Din Kilani. I am looking for my partner. I have three children. Please, my Arab brothers and sisters, if anyone knows if he is dead or alive, let me know through the Red Cross. I live in old Akka, house number 11/68." Nazmiyya's husband happened to be in a coffee shop where the radio was turned on when the message was read out. He jumped for joy, hugged the radio, and bought a round of coffee for everyone at the shop. He then went back to Palestine to reunite with his wife and children, but he had no way to enter the country legally as he was now considered a resident of an enemy state. He was smuggled across the border but got arrested and sat in prison until Nazmiyya, after much struggle, managed to get him permission to stay in Akka. Most stories did not have such happy endings.

Palestinians who escaped or were banished to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or the West Bank were not able to return once the State of Israel closed its borders, and they were condemned to life in exile, sometimes holding onto their old house keys and to the futile hope that they would someday return, even until the day of their death. Palestinians like Nazmiyya, who were within the borders of the State of Israel when it was established, were given Israeli citizenship but were held under a strict military regime. Those who remained in Palestine often saw their old houses auctioned off and taken over by strangers and their villages wiped out and replaced with new Jewish places of settlement—usually with new kibbutzim. Ahmed Ibriq of the village of Kuwaykat, whose residents were forced out in 1948, even worked as a hired laborer in kibbutz Beit HaEmek, which was established in 1949 on the ruins of his old village:

> I worked in the kibbutz for two years. I worked for them in *our* village, in *our* home, for two years. Sometimes I was happy because I felt like I was in my village, but sometimes I would go crazy, I'd be looking for my friends and for the children I grew up with. I'd act like a crazy person, forgetting that I was no longer in my own village [...] We were forced out of our homes having done no wrong. We did not know what we did to be driven out of our home.[85]

Amina Ataba of the village of Saffuriyya regularly came back to visit her old village, the lands of which had been given to several kibbutzim. Her encounter with the new residents was a painful one:

> When a man tells you, *ze shetah shelanu* ("that's our land" in Hebrew), what can you say to him? By God, I used to come early in the morning, take a gas burner with me and eggs and everything else and have breakfast there, sometimes lunch, we'd arrange some seats. [...] Suddenly this man shows up, saying, "What are you doing here?" My husband said, "I'm sitting, what am I doing?" He said, "Come on, get out of here, go home." We asked him why. He said, "*Ze shetah shelanu*," in Hebrew. My husband told him, "But these are our lands," and the man answered him, "Go ask your God, we were here two thousand years ago. Go away, go talk to your God."[86]

The story of the War of Independence, or the War of Liberation, or the War of Palestine, or the *Nakba*, is not a story of good guys against bad guys or of evil intruders versus freedom-loving natives; it is a tragic story of individuals on both sides who fought to the death to keep the only home they had. As wars go, one side eventually prevailed. The Israeli side buried its dead—nearly 6,000 of them—and began to rebuild what was shattered and lost. The Palestinian side lost almost

everything, with 13,000 dead and over 700,000 refugees. Every person who lived through this war knew that it could have been the other way around.

How much did kibbutz members, whose connection to their land was now sealed with blood, know about the other side? What did they know about the families who lost their homes, about farmers who lost their lands, about community life that was severed—sometimes only a few miles away? Probably not much. "We always just wanted to live in peace," they told themselves, and they firmly believed it. Most Jewish socialists had thought that their endeavors would ultimately benefit the local Arab Palestinians, not harm them. They felt that it was not their fault that the other side never wanted them here, decided to attack them brutally, and refused to reach a territorial compromise ("We wanted the Partition Plan, they didn't!" my parents remind me to this day). Kibbutz leaders promised that eventually Jews and Arabs would all be united in their hopes for equality and brotherhood and a better tomorrow because the wheels of the revolution never stop turning. Until that day comes, many of the kibbutzim took to singing a Hebrew version of the song that concludes Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, telling themselves that the land belongs to them by virtue of their care for it and the sacrifices they made for it:

> *What there is shall belong to those who are good for it, thus:*
> *The children to the maternal, that they thrive;*
> *The carriages to good drivers, that they are driven well;*
> *And the valley to the waterers, that it shall bear fruit.*[87]

But even kibbutzim that did attempt to protest the dispossession of Palestinians and refused to cooperate with it did not carry much weight. The case of kibbutz Bar'am in the upper Galilee is perhaps one of the most extreme examples. The village of Bir'im, which was populated mainly by Maronite Christians, was captured by Israeli forces in October 1948 as part of a wide-ranging operation to take over the northern part of the country. The villagers of Bir'im surrendered immediately and expressed their willingness to live under Israeli rule. They were told that they would have to leave for a short period of two weeks while the Israeli army was setting up some security arrangements in the area but that they would be allowed to go back thereafter. When they attempted to return, they were told that the area was still needed for military operations and that they should be patient. In April 1949, the village's land was officially appropriated by the State of Israel, which decided that a Jewish settlement should be established in the village to deter infiltration attempts from Lebanon. Three groups from HaShomer HaTza'ir were sent to set camp for a new kibbutz where the village had been. When they found out what had happened to the residents of the village, they announced that they were unwilling to settle there. Ya'akov Zohar, one of the founders, went to Haifa to meet with representatives of the government office in charge of land allocation so as to voice their protest. "Kid," said the

representative, "no one is asking you. If you don't like it, you can leave; I'll just bring another group that won't cause so many problems."[88]

The three groups moved out of the village and established their kibbutz right next to it. To this day, its members pride themselves on the fact that they are the only kibbutz along the northern border of Israel that does not reside inside a former Palestinian village. They called themselves Bar'am, a Hebrew name that maintains the sound of the name Bir'im. The members of Bar'am tried to help the Bir'im refugees with their legal struggle to return to their village, which culminated in a lawsuit filed to the Israeli Supreme Court in 1951. The court ruled in favor of the refugees, giving them permission to return to their village, but the ruling was never followed. There was concern that this would serve as a dangerous precedent for allowing refugees to return to Palestine, and so executive orders were put in place to prevent this. In 1953, the village was bombed by Israeli security forces. The villagers of Bir'im have not been able to return to this day.

In many ways, the war of 1948 marks the beginning of the kibbutz's slow descent from its heyday. Although the number of kibbutzim grew precipitously after the war—from 145 in 1948 to 219 in 1950—the enthusiasm and fervor that fueled the movement in previous decades started withering. The devastations of the war, the horrible losses of friends and family members, the experiences of having one's life and home hang by a thread, the long months of brutal fighting in which numerous kibbutz members participated—all of those had a corrosive, depleting effect on the movement and its people. This was not a time when one could talk about PTSD and not a society where one could openly express distress, grief, or fear, and so things stayed bottled up. People came back from the war different, less inclined to sing and dance all hours of the night. Some inner core of conviction and joy had cracked, as Ruta Weiner-Gafni of Degania (1930–1997) describes it:

> The most life-changing moment was when they told me about Yehudit [Berkovitz, who was killed on May 18, 1948], I mean, about Yehudit's death. I felt like that was it, like something in my life had ended. I then said that I'd be happy to give up on the State [of Israel] then and there. Admittedly, this response was exceptional, and I cannot necessarily speak in the name of most people [...] but I never let go of this feeling. This no longer seemed to me like a price that I could pay or like a price that I would pay, like something I could endure.[89]

But it was not only that. The war and its disastrous results for the Palestinian people brought to the fore something that the kibbutz had long repressed (and attempted to continue repressing, although less successfully): at the end of the day, Zionism and socialism *were* mutually contradictory—or at least one was required to choose between national loyalty to one's own people and care for the downtrodden of the entire world. Kibbutz members who witnessed the

banishment of Palestinians from their villages or actively participated in it could no longer cling to a beautiful, glorious story of pure ideals and making the world a better place. Eli Alon (1935–2018) of kibbutz Ein Shemer related how when he was a child, he and his classmates would go every week to the neighboring Arab village to bring the villagers bread and old clothes in demonstrative acts of socialist compassion. But then, "one day the state was established, and the Arabs were gone to their ghettos, over the mountains. In our sessions in HaShomer HaTza'ir, we continued to be the most just, the most righteous, who will never exploit anyone… 'the proletariat should always come before the nation…' and we lived with this growing dissonance."[90]

The landscape, physical and human alike, had changed, and the kibbutzim were the main instruments that the new state used to change it and to eradicate the memory of those who were there before. In an effort not to think about that, the kibbutzim had to avoid reflecting too much on what they were doing and who they were. For a movement of which self-reflection was a defining feature, this meant developing a certain obtuseness and callousness. The spark that lit the green flame began to flicker out.

5

In Search of Tomorrow

1950–1959

[...] The ass worked tirelessly thus,
And yoked himself to every task.
When at last, advanced in years,
He came to a "stronghold" to volunteer.
Like a dog he labored again,
Until at last his power waned.
And then one morning, gray and grim,
He was dragged to a pit to be buried therein.
And one fellow said to his friend:
"I'll grab the tail and you grab the head."
A ceremony at the grave was then held,
And a party member arrived and said:
"People here can live in peace,
Only thanks to donkeys like this."[91]

"An Ass Jumping Ahead," a delightfully bouncy song written by Dan Almagor and Sasha Argov in 1959, tells the story of a donkey who faithfully volunteered for the urgent Zionist tasks of every generation. In Hebrew, the phrase "an ass jumping ahead" is often used in a derogatory fashion to mock people who act without thinking just in order to be the first to respond. Almagor turned the overly eager ass not only into a literal donkey but also into a paragon of the Jews' revival in their country: the donkey participates dutifully and willingly in the establishment of new Jewish "Wall and Tower" settlements in the 1930s, signs up to serve in the British Army during World War II, fights for Israel's independence in 1948, and in his old age turns to the newest pioneering endeavor of the young state—setting up a military-agricultural "stronghold" in one of the

desolate regions. Worn out from a life of hard and mostly unacknowledged work, the one honor the donkey receives after his death is the recognition from some party official that "asses" like him, who take up national tasks without complaining and are ignored or even mocked for it, are those who allow others to have a (more or less) peaceful life.

As the first kibbutzim were approaching their fiftieth anniversary, the story that they told themselves about themselves began to bear disturbing similarities to the story of the ass in the song. Like the good-natured donkey, they were first to volunteer for every task—the most grueling, the most dangerous, and the most seemingly impossible—and they felt and were often told, not unjustifiably, that they were carrying the rest of the nation on their backs. But like the donkey in the song, they were now beginning to grow tired and, moreover, to have an acute sense of being unappreciated. In the 1950s, many kibbutz members were deeply hurt by a sense that the leadership of the young state—and first and foremost its formidable first prime minister David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973)—were ever so ready to drag them to the pit to be buried. They'd be kindly thanked for their service thus far but not mourned or missed. Unlike the donkey in the song, the kibbutzim did not die in the 1950s, but they began to experiment more radically with different ways of telling their story.

Whether or not "An Ass Jumping Ahead" made Israelis think of the kibbutz at the time, they all listened to it in 1959 when it was performed by the most popular band in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, the Nahal Band. Nahal is an acronym for *No'ar Halutzi Lohem* (Pioneer Warrior Youth), a military unit that was created as a consolation prize for the kibbutzim after the dissolution of the Palmach in 1948. The Palmach, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, was the Jewish paramilitary organization that took charge of defense and warfare operations during the 1940s and was housed and supported by the kibbutzim. Many Palmach warriors were born and raised in kibbutzim, and even those who were not were either making a home for themselves in existing kibbutzim or actively engaged in the establishment of new kibbutzim. To mitigate the kibbutzim's indignation and outrage after the dissolution, Ben-Gurion agreed to create the Nahal as a discrete unit within the Israeli Defense Forces, which would allow those who volunteer to serve in it to split their time between work in kibbutzim and regular military service. The Nahal combined agricultural and military operations by establishing "strongholds" of the type mentioned in the song, that is, setting up foundations for new kibbutzim in sparsely populated regions.

Partially in order to make the Nahal the most glorious and prestigious military unit, the first educational officer of the Nahal (who was, of course, a kibbutz member himself) decided to create a dedicated military band that would boost the morale of Nahal soldiers everywhere and would also serve as a mouthpiece for the unit and for the movement. Through the immense popularity of the Nahal Band—which, like the Red Army Choir that inspired it, also performed for civilian audiences and had songs released on the radio—the kibbutz maintained its

visibility and prominence in Israeli popular culture even as its sun was, in other respects, setting.

The kibbutzim lost their dominance in Israeli culture precipitously during the 1950s. In 1949, they constituted about 7.5 percent of the Jewish population in the newly founded state, and almost one-third of the members of Israel's first parliament were kibbutz members. By 1960, the kibbutzim constituted only 3.5 percent of the population. This is due not so much to a wave of departures from the kibbutzim—although that, too, had taken place—but primarily to the fact that the population of the State of Israel as a whole had more than tripled during this decade. In 1948, when the state was founded, it numbered about 600,000 Jews. Within a mere eighteen months, primarily due to massive immigration from Middle Eastern and North African countries—much of it orchestrated by the new state, which was eager to grow—the Jewish population was over 1.8 million people. By 1960, it was two million. With few exceptions, the immigrants who arrived during those years did *not* join kibbutzim. Moreover, they were profoundly alienated from the kibbutzim and everything they stood for. As the Jewish society in Israel changed and faced new challenges, the kibbutz had to rethink its own mission and identity. Kibbutz members, who were taught to ask only, "What am I giving?" from the day they were born, were now asking for the first time, "What am I getting?" Uncertainties as to the answer to this question, which were made apparent through the boisterous attempts to deny the very legitimacy of the question, ushered in a new phase in the history of the kibbutz, one with fewer exclamation points and more question marks.

The relationship between the kibbutzim and the first government of the State of Israel started out on the wrong foot. The first blow that David Ben-Gurion, the head of the new State of Israel, dealt to the kibbutzim was the dissolution of the Palmach in November 1948. A sovereign state, Ben-Gurion maintained, should have a fully dedicated army and a general draft, not self-directed militias of guerilla warriors who spend half their time growing cabbages and tomatoes and singing by the bonfire between raids. For the kibbutzim, this executive decision was a slap in the face. They saw it as a vindicative move on Ben-Gurion's part against his political opposition from the left, and this impression was bolstered further when they found out that some of the most talented and charismatic commanders of the Palmach, with the greatest military accomplishments, were given no role at all in the newly established army. Palmach officers who affiliated with Ben-Gurion's party, MaPAI (an acronym for *mifleget po'alei eretz yisra'el*, the Party of the Workers of the Land of Israel), or who were considered apolitical, were made generals in the state army, whereas those who were more left-leaning were sent back home to their kibbutzim.

The dissolution of the Palmach had a rippling effect in the kibbutzim. On a social level, it created a lost generation of sorts: young and talented men and women, often deeply scarred by war but also still hungry for adventure and challenge, found themselves in very unsatisfying and often mind-numbing kibbutz jobs such as piling manure or stacking hay or washing dishes, having expected to lead a life of military and political leadership. They were bored, slighted, and purposeless. The question of "what's next" was a nagging one, and agitation and frustration created a sense of unrest among the younger generations in the kibbutzim. A song from that time expressed the forlornness of former *palmachniks* (Palmach fighters), describing them as desperately "searching for tomorrow."[92]

On a political level, the dissolution of the Palmach deepened existing tensions not only between the state and the kibbutzim but also within and among the kibbutzim themselves. On one side were the two large kibbutz movements, the United Kibbutz and HaShomer HaTza'ir, both of which were identified with the Palmach and were also to the left of Ben-Gurion's government. Considering that the leaders of both movements were opposed to the Partition Plan and that Ben-Gurion just barely managed to get their representatives to support the establishment of the State of Israel, it was not entirely surprising that he wanted to keep them away from the centers of power. On the other side was the third kibbutz movement, the Association of Kvutzot, which was closely affiliated with Ben-Gurion's own party and supported his policies (the fourth and smallest kibbutz movement, the Religious Kibbutz, was too small and numerically insignificant to be cause for concern). Conflicts between and within the different movements became increasingly heated and often developed into internal conflicts between members of the same kibbutz.

The second blow from Ben-Gurion came after the elections for the first parliament in 1949. The United Kibbutz (led by Yitzhak Tabenkin) and HaShomer HaTza'ir (led by Meir Ya'ari) joined forces and established a joint party, MaPaM (an acronym for *mifleget po'alim me'uhedet*, the United Workers Party). The two did not especially like each other, to say the least, but they estimated that a joint party was their only way to get enough votes to be included in the coalition. They were right in predicting that they would get a significant portion of the votes: MaPaM got nineteen seats in the first parliament, almost one-sixth of the total 120 seats. MaPAI, Ben-Gurion's party, got forty-six seats. Ben-Gurion could have formed a majority coalition with MaPaM alone without needing anyone else—but to MaPaM's shock, he preferred to keep them in the opposition and to form a coalition with the religious parties and a couple of center-right parties.

Ben-Gurion knew what he was doing; it was already clear at that point that the United States and the Soviet Union were headed toward a path of escalating tension and rivalry and that the tiny and fragile State of Israel had to choose which empire it was going to rely on in order to survive. Ben-Gurion decided to place his bet on the United States, and the last thing he needed was communist sympathizers who adored Stalin in his government. It certainly did not help

MaPaM's cause that when Ben-Gurion presented his first government to the parliament in March 1949, Ya'akov Hazan of MaPaM declared, "The Soviet Union is our second homeland." The rift between MaPAI and MaPaM, and between those who abhorred the Soviet Union and those who admired it, would soon turn into a rupture in the United Kibbutz Movement from which it arguably never healed.

The third blow came in January 1950. Ben-Gurion stood in the parliament and said the following:

> The pioneering movement [i.e., the kibbutz movement] among us [...] has never failed as it has failed at this great and difficult time. Where is the pioneering movement when it comes to the integration of new immigrants? Those thousands of pioneers who worked great things in their own farms and kibbutzim—what have they done for the people's great immigration? For the immigrants of their own farms—yes; for the immigration into their own kibbutzim—yes. But what have they done for the other 300,000 immigrants? For two years I have been ashamed and embarrassed as I witnessed this failure of the pioneering movement. The greatest thing in our entire history has taken place, the exodus has started, the bringing together of the diasporas has started, and what have our pioneers done? Have the kibbutzim stepped forward?[93]

This was the most painful blow of them all. It was one thing for Ben-Gurion to have petty political disputes and power plays with the kibbutz movements; it was a whole other thing to accuse them of not doing enough for their country and for the people, for failing at the pioneering mission. The kibbutzim were still devastated, physically and mentally, from the 1948 war. They were struggling to keep themselves afloat, often without enough working members and with constant threats of hostile infiltration from the borders. What were they supposed to do? Go back to the days of tents and shacks and meager food and share what little they had with hordes of other people with whom they had no real ideological or even cultural connection?

When Ben-Gurion said this, he was at his wit's end. The state he headed was committed to taking in every Jew who wanted to come (as well as to convincing Jews that they wanted to come even when they didn't), but it did not have nearly enough resources to feed or house them all and certainly not enough jobs for them. Immigrants were arriving at a rate of one thousand per day, and there was no plan whatsoever as to what to do with them. New immigrants were placed in temporary tent camps called *ma'abarot,* in wretched conditions, with nothing to do all day but wait. Crime, hunger, and epidemics were soon rampant. The kibbutzim seemed to Ben-Gurion like a perfect solution—or at least, the only feasible solution in sight—for this ever-growing problem. The kibbutzim needed working hands, and the new immigrants needed a place to live and food to eat as

well as someone to help them acculturate to their new country. Wasn't this a perfect match?

A transition camp (*ma'abarah*) in 1950.

Not quite, as it turns out. One side of the problem was that most of the new immigrants that the kibbutzim were willing to take—namely, those who came from Eastern and Central Europe, like most kibbutz members—did not want to live in a kibbutz. They were deterred by the undeniable physical hardship, by the separation of children from parents, by the disdainful and dismissive attitude toward religion, and by the absence of autonomy. Moreover, most of them were not taken in the least by the idea of working without concrete pay, without the possibility of saving for the future, and without promotions or rewards. Those who could find distant relatives—or even acquaintances of acquaintances from the same town in the old country—relied on them, and with some favors and connections they moved out of the transition camps and started off independently in the cities.

Immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (commonly referred to as *Mizrahim*, literally "Orientals") had no networks they could rely on in the new country nor did they have the ear and sympathy of the authorities who looked down on them with pity, at best, or with contempt, at worst. Most of them did not really know what a kibbutz was, but they were willing to go there to get out of the miserable transition camp. The kibbutzim, however—and this was the other side of the problem—did not really want them. Kibbutz members were very skeptical

that those people—devoid of any socialist consciousness, often deeply religious, still faithful to patriarchal family structures, and not sharing any of the European cultural heritage of the kibbutz members—could ever fit in. Moreover, this immigration wave was different from anything that preceded it. Up until the establishment of the state, immigration was highly self-selecting and consisted almost exclusively of younger people in the prime of their lives. The Mizrahim, however, came with old people and with sick people, and with eight, ten, or twelve children per family. Was the kibbutz to take *all* of them in? Including the blind eighty-year-old grandmother who would never learn a word of Hebrew? Including the five-year-old boy with polio who would never walk?

Kibbutz members were hurt and outraged by Ben-Gurion's accusations, not only because his expectations of them were unrealistic but also because he completely ignored the kibbutz's role in housing, educating, and training immigrant youth through Aliyat HaNo'ar, the Youth Aliyah institution. Numerous groups of teenagers from Middle Eastern and North African countries were placed in kibbutzim, which allocated tremendous human and material resources to this endeavor. Those teenagers were sometimes selected back in their countries of origin and sometimes from the transitional camps in Israel, but either way they were completely and thoroughly separated from their parents. The separation was not only physical: those kids were expected to leave behind the world from which their parents came, to dismiss it as primitive and backward, and to be thoroughly transformed into new humans in the image and likeness of kibbutz members. The kibbutzim prided themselves on this noble effort, and they were not always aware of the price they were extracting from these teenagers, who were torn between their old and new identities and were doomed never to feel at home in either world. In his novel *A Rooster for Atonement*, Eli Amir, who was born in Iraq and came to kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek in 1950, when he was thirteen, described his experiences:

> One day my cousin came for a visit, and I was pleased that he would not go into the dining hall [...] he talked about non-kosher food and unfamiliar dishes, but the truth was more bitter. I advised him not to go into the dining hall [...] because the kibbutz members would never sit with us because of the way we behaved. They gave us a corner at the edge of the dining hall, and visits from our relatives embarrassed us all. Our visitors stood out in their strange outfits, and we knew that the kibbutz members did not know how to digest them and us, who were torn between the two worlds. After every such visit our group diminished. Parents refused to let their sons and daughters stay in this foreign place.[94]

The youth groups of Aliyat HaNo'ar were kept separate from the local kibbutz youth. The former worked in the morning and studied in the afternoon, whereas the latter studied in the morning and worked in the afternoon. Counselors and

teachers sometimes attempted to initiate joint activities but often without much success. In the words of Eli Amir again:

> Their [i.e., the local youth's] efforts to teach us how to behave, what to sing, how to dance, what to read, and how to be different from who we were, were a burden for them and for us. They had ready-made garments, and we were supposed to dress in those garments so as to be like them. We have, indeed, removed our old garments, but the new garments were too new, too stiff, like just-purchased shoes. Our interactions grew less and less frequent, and when one day they stopped altogether, no one noticed. The mutual failure was present between us.[95]

The symbiosis that Ben-Gurion envisioned between the new immigrants and the kibbutzim was never created. Instead, what was created was the founding fathers' and mothers' nightmare: a capitalistic arrangement in which those who own the means of production exploit the cheap labor force of the oppressed masses. The kibbutzim desperately needed working hands in their fields and in their factories, and the new immigrants who were settled in so-called development towns, often in the vicinity of kibbutzim, desperately needed jobs. Kibbutzim started doing what they said they would never do and hired residents of those towns, almost all of them Mizrahim, to work long hours for minimum pay. Often treated harshly and with condescension, residents of development towns who worked in kibbutzim got a glimpse of what seemed to them like a life of luxury and bliss from which they were barred. "We felt like we were their slaves," many hired kibbutz workers from adjacent towns would continue to say for many years.

And so by the early 1950s, the kibbutzim already sensed that something very profound had changed. They were no longer the favored children, no longer the larger-than-life heroes who dreamed an impossible dream and made it come true. They were a rather small sector in a country that was becoming increasingly diverse and had myriads of problems that they could not, or would not, be the ones to solve. The dream, too, seems to have been diluted and muddied up as people's idealistic fervor cooled down, and the need for compromises—economic, political, and social—raised its head over and over again. At that time of crisis and of growing disillusionment with the fledgling State of Israel, the light of the Great Mother to the East, the Soviet Union, began to shine more brightly.

Zionism and socialism, the two pillars of the kibbutz movement, have always resided a bit uneasily with each other. First, there was the question of whether and to what extent Jewish settlers in Palestine should dispossess Palestinian residents in the name of Jewish national revival. What was to take precedence,

one's loyalty to one's people or one's loyalty to fellow farmers and laborers regardless of nationality? Socialist doctrine asserts that the worldwide proletariat comes before the nation, but that doctrine was incommensurate with Jews' striving for their own territory. How to resolve the contradiction? This issue was addressed though hundreds of apologetic books, pamphlets, and speeches, but the cold argument of survival had the final word: Jews believed they had no future, no life, anywhere but in Palestine; if they didn't fight for their existence in Palestine, there would be no Jewish people at all, socialist or otherwise. Meir Ya'ari of HaShomer HaTza'ir developed a convoluted theory that he named the "Stages Doctrine," according to which Jews must first attain political sovereignty before they could eventually incorporate themselves into the universal socialist revolution. In other words, the nation must precede the proletariat today so that the proletariat can precede the nation tomorrow.

The second source of unease was the fact that in the Soviet Union, the cradle of socialism and the place where the revolution was ostensibly fully realized, Zionist activists were imprisoned and any kind of Jewish or Hebrew education was banned. The totalitarian nature of the Soviet regime and especially its hostility toward Zionism were addressed differently by different political and ideological factions. The more moderate camp considered the Soviet Union a source of initial inspiration where good ideas had gone horribly wrong, and it insisted on sharply distinguishing the kibbutz's socialism from Soviet communism. The more extreme camp, spearheaded by HaShomer HaTza'ir, believed that it was only a matter of time before the Soviet Union would come around and embrace Zionism and become the biggest friend and supporter of the kibbutz movement in particular and of Zionism in general. Every year HaShomer HaTza'ir faithfully celebrated November 7, the day of the Bolshevik Revolution, and its members fantasized about the day when Stalin would come to visit their kibbutz, get a tour of the farms and the fields, have dinner in the communal dining hall, and eventually say: "Comrades, you've done it better than we have!"

World War II, in which the Soviet Union heroically withstood the Nazi invasion, elevated its standing among all the Jews in Palestine but overwhelmingly so among the kibbutzim—and not only the kibbutzim of HaShomer HaTza'ir, which always maintained an attachment to their "socialist homeland," but also among the larger and more politically diverse United Kibbutz Movement. In May 1947, Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet ambassador to the UN, expressed his country's support for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, and in November of that year the Soviet Union voted in favor of the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. In addition, during the 1948 war a good amount of the ammunition and artillery that the Jewish side used was provided by Czechoslovakia with the support of the Soviet Union. The more left-leaning members and ideologues in the kibbutzim were overjoyed: here was the proof that the Socialist Mother, the leader of the World of Tomorrow, had come around to Zionism.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was unprecedented infatuation with the Soviet Union in many of the kibbutzim. Lenin's and Stalin's portraits, hanging side by side, decorated dining rooms and classrooms and quotes from both of them punctuated speeches, lectures, pamphlets, and school lesson plans. As one kibbutz member put it, "If they'd wake me at 2 a.m., the first words to come out of my mouth would be, 'An-inseparable-part-of-the-world-of-revolution-with-the-Soviet-Union-at-the-head.'"[96] Some teachers in the kibbutzim of HaShomer HaTza'ir even modified the educational curriculum in keeping with Soviet scientific doctrines, such as Pyotr Kropotkin's counter-Darwinian theory of "spontaneous solidarity" of all living creatures and Trofim Lysenko's theory that traits acquired during an organism's lifetime can be genetically passed on to the next generations.

HaShomer HaTza'ir youth movement with red flags on the May 1 parade, 1946.

There were multiple reasons for this Soviet infatuation. In part, the tedium and exhaustion experienced by many kibbutz members after the war and

devastation of 1948 led ideologues to push for an exciting new cause, for a new set of hard-core loyalties that its members could identify with. In part, the disappointment from the new Jewish state, where kibbutz members felt underappreciated by the leadership and did not have the political weight they hoped for, made them seek a new international horizon that would give their lives value and meaning. And in part, the strong association with the Soviet Union—or lack thereof—gave content to preexisting political rivalries within the kibbutzim between more left-leaning members and more centrist circles, especially in the United Kibbutz Movement. Camps within the kibbutzim that had been arguing with each other since the 1920s now hung their squabbles on a global conflict: Eastern Bloc versus Western Bloc.

When David Ben-Gurion announced Israel's support for the United States' invasion of Korea in the summer of 1950, the question of Soviet affiliation and loyalty became an urgent one for people who keenly lived and died through ideologies. It wasn't just a question of socialism versus capitalism or revolutionary internationalism versus national self-interest; it was seen as a matter of life and death. It seemed evident to many that the Third World War was imminent and that before long the Red Army would be at the gates of Israel. Whom would socialist Israelis go with? Would they fight alongside their state, or would they join the Soviet Union against it? Some kibbutz members were even stashing rifles in tunnels and pits so that they would have them ready when the war began. Ben-Gurion, on his end, countered the Soviet loyalism of the kibbutzim with vitriolic anti-communism that took some of its cues from the American Red Scare of those days. He suggested several times outlawing the communist party in the parliament and said plainly regarding Israeli communists, "If we'll need to build carceral camps—we'll build them; if we'll need to shoot—we'll shoot."[97] Accordingly, the friction within the kibbutzim around the question of communist proclivity evolved into friction around the question of the kibbutz's autonomy and freedom vis-à-vis the state—or perhaps the other way around: those adamant to maintain the autonomy of the kibbutz vis-à-vis the state developed more pronounced communist tendencies.

Those leading the pro-Soviet zeal in the kibbutzim were mainly the younger members for whom this was a newfound way of rebelling and asserting themselves against the generation of the founders. Filled with revolutionary fervor, the younger members accused their parents, who once rebelled against their own parents by coming to Palestine and shedding the old Jewish world, that they had grown tired and stagnant, complicit with the oppressive power of the state and with Ben-Gurion's semi-dictatorship. The older generation described the charismatic speakers and politicians who steered the kibbutz's youngsters toward the left as satanic cult leaders who took hold of their children's souls.

One kibbutz movement, HaShomer HaTza'ir, which insisted on "ideational collectivity" from an early stage, set a strict pro-Soviet line in its kibbutzim. Another kibbutz movement, The Association of Kvutzot, ardently supported

MaPAI, Ben-Gurion's ruling party, and stood behind his policies. The United Kibbutz Movement—the largest of the three—was divided. A little over half of its members, mostly those of the older generation, were MaPAI supporters and rejected the pro-Soviet line. A little under half of its members, mostly those of the younger generation, supported the more left-leaning and pro-Soviet MaPaM. The United Kibbutz Movement was always rife with conflicts and rivalries, political factionalism and power struggles, and many of the old animosities worked themselves into the new animosity. But what ensued in this movement in the early 1950s was completely unprecedented.

It started with the apple of the kibbutz's eye: education. In a society where education was profoundly political and ideological, the question of who would be a schoolteacher or a youth counselor was synonymous with the question of the kibbutz's values and commitments. Each side opposed the other taking a leading role in educational decisions and their implementation. Then there was the question of bringing in new members; can one side reject new potential members who wish to join the kibbutz simply because they vote for the other party? Eventually, the political power struggle extended to each and every kibbutz operation, from the dairy farm to the barley field, from the factory to the laundry room—at times to such extent that these operations ceased to function. Kibbutz meetings became heated, violent screaming matches that often turned into fist fights. With the kibbutz being a social pressure cooker in which people who fiercely disagreed with each other also had to eat with each other and work with each other and serve on committees with each other and live next door to each other, the situation soon became unbearable. Yael Tabenkin of Ein Harod (1923–2020) remembered that time as an ongoing nightmare:

> In addition to physical fighting—and there was much of that as well—each side tried to harm the other as much as possible. They deliberately damaged the milking machine, so we damaged the elevator that they used to bring food up from the kitchen to the dining hall [...] I was the kitchen manager, but I couldn't continue being there—I ran away. All the other kitchen workers were MaPAI supporters, and they made my life a living hell. There were violent incidents in the fields as well, fighting over a tractor or whatever... [The dining hall was divided into two, with the opposing sides sitting separately] There was no barbed wire fence, but there was a virtual partition [...] It was terrible, terrible. And there were children in the midst of all of this. There was such hatred.[98]

It became evident that the factions were too hostile to each other and the rift too deep for political rivals in these kibbutzim to continue living together. As of 1951, kibbutzim of the United Kibbutz Movement started splitting up. In a kibbutz where the majority were MaPAI supporters, the minority of MaPaM supporters packed up and joined another kibbutz where the majority were MaPaM

supporters, and vice versa. For example, two hundred MaPAI-supporting members of kibbutz Beit HaShita left their homes and joined kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar, and two hundred MaPaM-supporting members of Tel Yosef left their homes and joined BeitHaShita. The center-leaning MaPAI loyalists officially left the United Kibbutz Movement and joined the Association of Kvutzot to form a new movement, the Union of Kibbutzim (*ihud hakibbutzim*).

Those splinters and divisions may seem petty and even ridiculous today, and the animosity between the "United Kibbutz" and the "Union of Kibbutzim" may sound almost like a parody (reminiscent of Monty Python's "Judean People's Front" versus the "People's Front of Judea"). But for the people who lived through it, this was a life-shattering, deeply traumatic event that overhauled the most fundamental elements of their lives: home, family, friends, a sense of belonging—and above all, the core of the kibbutz's utopian idea, the notion that they were living in the best possible model of a human society. In an interview conducted in 1979, one woman who left Beit HaShita and joined Ayelet HaShahar in 1952 described the experience as one from which she never recovered. Twenty-seven years after settling in Ayelet HaShahar, she still felt like her real home was Beit HaShita, where she only lived for fourteen years:

> During our final hours [in Beit HaShita], I started sobbing and couldn't stop for three full days. And when we arrived [in Ayelet HaShahar] I felt that this was the end for me. I didn't unpack, I didn't open the suitcases, I didn't bring my daughters to the children's house, and all I could say was, "No, this is not my home." [...] I eventually settled [in Ayelet HaShahar], but only afterwards I realized what a shock I'd been through. [Beit HaShita] was a dream for me [...] for fourteen years it was my entire world, and in the end, it shattered so terribly [...] Never again did I create the same kinds of friendships as I used to have. I say hello to everyone, but there's nothing. I can easily pack up my things and leave this place. Even today. There's no emotional connection like there used to be there, where I could walk at night feeling that I knew every stone and every rock by heart. That was home. Here, it's impossible...[99]

The massive departures of groups of members from one kibbutz to another meant that every aspect of life had to be reconfigured. Children's age groups and classes were dismantled, certain kibbutz operations remained without workers, and those who departed and resettled had to make a new home for themselves in new communities that were notoriously close-knit and difficult to penetrate. Perhaps most tragically, the political factions in the kibbutzim tore apart families, separating husbands from wives and elderly parents from their children.

In the largest kibbutzim, the minority group did not migrate to another existing kibbutz. Rather, these kibbutzim split down the middle and turned from one kibbutz into two. Whereas in some of those kibbutzim the group that departed gave their splinter kibbutz a new name, in the case of three kibbutzim—Ein Harod,

Ashdot Ya'akov, and Giv'at Hayim—the original kibbutz and the splinter kibbutz retained the same name. If you visit any of those three kibbutzim today, you'll see two signs at the entrance: one directs you, for example, to "Ein Harod United," the kibbutz whose members once supported MaPaM and remained in the United Kibbutz Movement, and the other directs you to "Ein Harod Union," a separate kibbutz whose members supported MaPAI and joined the Union of Kibbutzim back in the day. The two kibbutzim, adjacent to each other, had separate schools, separate agricultural operations, and separate cemeteries. Most people passing by these signs—and even most of those who live in these kibbutzim today—have no idea why there are two kibbutzim by the same name. The rivalries that brought about the rift were forgotten ages ago.

For years, the split was one of the most silenced topics in the kibbutzim. It was too painful to talk about, and perhaps people were ashamed to admit that they ever fought about something that seemed, in retrospect, so foolish. In many ways this horrific display of ideology and zeal going awry and superseding all other affinities and relationships marked the end of one era in the kibbutzim and the beginning of another. The time of big dreams, world-encompassing ideals, and uncompromising principles had ended; the time of seeking a normal life, a better life here and now, had begun.

As for the Soviet enthusiasm, it waned rapidly after 1952 when Stalin's regime initiated several antisemitic and anti-Zionist policies (including the imprisonment of a kibbutz member who was visiting Prague, on the charge of anti-communist Zionist activities). After 1956, when the Soviet Union supported Egypt in its war with Israel and when Nikita Khrushchev openly spoke of the atrocities of Stalin's regime, almost nothing was left of this enthusiasm. Some of the leaders of HaShomer HaTza'ir tried to convince their followers that the Soviet Union's cause was still a worthy one and that the kibbutz should not give up on it, but no one seemed to be listening anymore.

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Ideological fatigue alongside a sense that the urgent national tasks were now the responsibility of state authorities and no longer of the kibbutzim generated a new state of mind in the kibbutzim, which acquired the moniker "the stalks turning inward." The name was derived from a song written in 1930:

We have seen our toil, like the toil of ants,
Each person shall bring a harvest full of sheaves,
A pile of grain will rise majestically,
With the stalks turning inward, inward the stalks.[100]

Back when it was written, the song reflected the fear of imminent shortage and famine and the need to prepare and store food for difficult days to come. In the

late 1950s, the song came to mean something else: it stood for the increasing tendency in the kibbutzim to focus on their own home in the narrow sense—not the national home but the home of each kibbutz as a self-standing entity—and even more unprecedentedly, the individual family home. Some members resisted this trend; the kibbutz, they thought, should still be first and foremost a tireless task force whose members go wherever they are needed, it should take the lead on national tasks like defense, immigration, and education, and it should work steadily to create and support new kibbutzim. But those members' voices carried less and less weight.

This change in mindset came about at the same time as—and perhaps as a result of—economic growth and prosperity in many of the kibbutzim. This prosperity was due to several factors. First, the enormous growth of the population in Israel meant that there were many more mouths to feed, and the kibbutzim were handsomely compensated for their agricultural production. This allowed them to mechanize many of their operations and to become more efficient and more productive. More and more kibbutzim started venturing toward industry in addition to agriculture, and they built medium- and even large-scale factories. Ben-Gurion's pressure on the kibbutzim to provide jobs for new immigrants from neighboring development towns allowed kibbutzim to substantially enlarge their factories or even build new ones through government grants and hired work. Finally, as of 1955 large sums of money flowed into the kibbutzim through the Reparations Agreement between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany. This agreement promised financial recompense to individuals who lived through World War II in one of the German occupied countries. Some kibbutz members who were eligible for reparations refused to apply for them out of principle; some (quite a few) took their money and left the kibbutz; but many decided to take the money and hand it over to the kibbutz's collective funds. The transformative effect of the reparation funds on the kibbutzim was almost immediate, and it was felt not only on the macro scale but also on the micro scale—in the quality and quantity of food, clothes, and home furnishings.

But as it turned out, communal principles and arrangements that helped sustain people in a time of poverty faced many challenges in a time of prosperity. First came improvements in the physical housing conditions of adult kibbutz members. Small rooms with nothing other than a bed, a few shelves, and a chair were replaced with two-bedroom apartments that featured closets and indoor toilets and sinks (and later even showers). Next came electric kettles. While an electric kettle may sound like a fairly basic amenity, within the scheme of kibbutz life this was a revolution; it meant that it was now possible to make a hot beverage at home, thereby chipping away at the place of the communal dining hall in community life. This meant that kibbutz members now needed other things as well in their private apartments: mugs, coffee, tea, sugar, milk. By the early 1960s, members' apartments featured small refrigerators, dining tables, and chairs. In

some kibbutzim members even got a small radio. Each one of those changes was preceded by months and months of arguments and counterarguments. "This is the end of the kibbutz," people said when electric kettles were provided. "This is the end of the kibbutz," they said when hot water pipes were installed in the residential areas. "This is the end of the kibbutz," they said when trash cans were provided for members' kitchens.

A typical kibbutz house in 1945 with four apartments on each floor and shared toilets.

It is interesting to note that around the same time, housing conditions somewhat improved also in the Great Mother, the Soviet Union. There were some notable parallels between living arrangements in kibbutzim and the common model of urban living in Soviet cities, namely, the *kommunalka*—buildings in which each family was allocated a small single room of about nine square meters with toilets, kitchens, and showers shared among all the tenants. In both the urban *kommunalka* and the rural kibbutz, close quarters and an absolute lack of privacy were the result not only of genuine financial constraints but also of an ideological rejection of the bourgeois notion of a private household. Communal housing with minimal space and amenities discouraged individuality, forced one into the collective space, and was perfect for mutual surveillance. The meagerness of one's home also reflected the assumption that most of one's waking hours should be spent working so that at the end of the day one only really needs a bed to sleep in so as to restore strength for the next day.

There were, of course, significant differences between the two. In the kibbutz children did not live with their parents, so the space issue was much less dire, and

services such as food and laundry were provided collectively, without the need to wait endlessly or fight to use the stove or shower. The kibbutz featured one- or two-story buildings with adjacent rooms that opened to the outside, whereas soviet buildings were usually massive constructions of concrete and cheap wood with dozens and dozens of apartments opening to stuffy and overcrowded corridors that people used as storage areas. The most decisive difference, of course, was the fact that kibbutz living was voluntary rather than forced by a totalitarian regime. I'd take a kibbutz over a *kommunalka* every single day. Nevertheless, around the same time that Soviet planning committees realized that something had to be done to make housing arrangements a little bit more livable, there was a move toward improvement of living conditions in the kibbutzim as well.

Those who said that all the improvements to the members' apartments were the end of the kibbutz were not entirely wrong. The enhancement of members' living quarters effectively created private homes in a place that spurned the idea of privacy. Moreover, it created a designated family space in a place that spurned the idea of the nuclear family. One's home was supposed to be the kibbutz *as a whole*, and one's family was supposed to be the kibbutz *as a whole*, so the rise of the private home did mean that the relation between the individual and the collective had changed. To be sure, kibbutzim pondered and debated the relation between the individual and the collective since their very beginning; questions regarding the extent of one's autonomy vis-à-vis oneself, one's relatives, one's leisure activities, and even one's political convictions and reading materials, were discussed endlessly. But it was somewhat ironic that when the austerity of strict communalism and self-inflicted hardship in the name of ideological compliance first began to crack, the first soft spot to be revealed was not, say, people's desire to raise their own children, but rather their desire to have *things* that would make life a little more comfortable.

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One of the most symbolic changes to the kibbutzim in the 1950s was the transition from communal clothing that was undiscerningly distributed to members of the kibbutz to individual clothing for each member. Until then, at the end of every week each kibbutz member received a bundle with all the clean clothes they would need during the week: pants, shirts, sweater, a white shirt for the Sabbath, et cetera. If one went on an errand in the city and needed a jacket or dress shoes, they would have to make a special request. The fact that you got a shirt or a skirt did not mean that the shirt or skirt you got actually fit you since the communal clothing supplies could not keep tabs on each and every member's measurements when distributing the clothes. That, however, was the lesser problem: the greater problem was that since the clothes belong to no one in particular, the members handled them quite poorly. Rather than handing them over to be washed they

simply threw them around whenever they took them off—in the shower or elsewhere—and you could often see people wiping greasy hands or even shoes directly on their clothes.

Preparing weekly clothing supplies in kibbutz Ginegar, 1947.

In the 1950s, kibbutzim increasingly instituted a different method: each member was assigned a number and was given certain clothing items that were marked with the same number, so he or she would receive the same clothes after they had been washed, week after week. This practice was meant to ensure both that sizes were appropriate and that members would take better care of the clothes that were now, at least psychologically, individually owned. Needless to say, this change, too, was decried as "the end of the kibbutz." The marking of clothes with numbers was mourned as an icon of capitalistic alienation, and the individual allocation of items that actually fit the individual was castigated as a precursor of private ownership. But despite the stern warnings and the aggrieved laments, the change was eventually implemented in every kibbutz. The allocation of a "laundry number" became the unofficial rite of passage for new kibbutz members, and the little numerical tags that became emblems of kibbutz life spoke truths that were becoming increasingly evident: that one size does not fit all; that for kibbutz members to care about the collective good, the collective good needs to consider their needs as individuals; and that people who have something to call their own are sometimes more oriented toward justice and fairness than people who don't. Perhaps now that the "end of the kibbutz" had come, it could actually begin again?

6

A Little Bit of Ease

1960–1979

Four in the afternoon,
As usual, it is still hot.
In the lane of chinaberry trees
Babies are learning how to walk—
On their own.
The evening wind is adorning itself,
Bringing to the balconies
Smells of hay and alfalfa,
And a little bit of ease. [...]

On the path, the high school girls
Contentedly return from the shower,
And a new volunteer from Denmark
Sings as he sees them—
At four in the afternoon. [...]

A little girl is rushing,
"Mommy, mommy, the movie is here!
Come outside your room,
We'll put on a sweater and go!"—
At four in the afternoon. [...]

It's now five, and six, and seven,
Ein Harod, Beit Alfa, Geva,
Instant coffee, jam, and ice cream—
What more can we say,
At four in the afternoon?[101]

Yoram Taharlev (1938–2022) wrote "Four in the Afternoon" in 1965 as a humorous, loving ode to a quintessential kibbutz scene: those afternoon hours after the workday had ended, when children leave the children's house to spend a few hours in their parents' apartments, when a sense of leisure and lightheartedness brings some cheer to the austere workers. Taharlev, one of Israel's most prolific songwriters, wrote this song about his own kibbutz, Yagur; but as the song itself notes, this afternoon experience applies to any and every kibbutz—"Ein Harod, Beit Alfa, Geva" and all others—and anyone who spent time in a kibbutz in the sixties and seventies would recognize it. The song was performed by the most popular band of the time and greatest ambassador for the kibbutz, the Nahal Band, and it was brought to every household in Israel not only through the radio but also through an exciting and still controversial newcomer to the state: television. Television broadcasts did not officially start in Israel until 1968 for fear that they would corrupt the youth and degrade the culture, and it was only the assurance that television would be used for state-approved educational content that convinced the naysayers to acquiesce.

What a striking difference between Nathan Alterman's description of the ominous silence in the Jezreel Valley in the 1930s and Taharlev's description of the cheerful chatter and bon vivant in that same valley in the 1960s. It would have been inconceivable for songs about the kibbutz in the 1930s and 1940s to mention "instant coffee, jam, and ice cream"—what have such trifles got to do with the tremendous mission of the socialist revival of Jews in their country?—nor would it be legitimate for any self-respecting member of a kibbutz to even think of those things as tokens of a good life. In 1965, this was possible—not only because the ethos of the kibbutzim had changed but also because in the early sixties kibbutz members' rooms were equipped with mini-refrigerators for the first time. To be sure, the coffee and ice cream in the song are consumed in the members' apartments or on their front lawns—not in the communal dining hall. The song also mentions the weekly movie screening, which the little girl in the song urges her mother to make it to in time, as well as a new and exciting presence in the kibbutzim: handsome volunteers from around the world, especially from Scandinavia. Like the electric kettles of the 1950s, all these changes—from the refrigerators to the film screenings to the international volunteers—were dreaded by many of the older guard of the kibbutz, who warned that these were Trojan horses that would infiltrate the inner sanctum of the Kibbutz and thereby bring about its destruction.

And yet, despite the frequent warnings and consternations over "decline," "burnout," and "deterioration" in the 1960s and 1970s, in many ways these two decades could be considered the golden age of the kibbutz. Not only because of conveniences like air conditioning and indoor showers with hot water, although these amenities surely eased a great deal of the stresses and distresses that kibbutz members dealt with on a daily basis in previous decades, but also because of a more fundamental change of mindset. During those years people finally started

asking how the lofty idea of the kibbutz could be modified to fit flesh-and-blood humans rather than how flesh-and-blood humans should be modified to fit the lofty idea. Gradually, new windows began to open in what felt more and more like an overcrowded, overheated room, and some fresh air was able to get in.

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The comforts and conveniences afforded by the economic prosperity in the kibbutzim in the 1960s brought to the fore a whole new set of challenges. Ever since Degania was established in 1910, one of the most sacred principles of the kibbutz was "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." Now the question of *how much* reared its ugly head. First, how much is "according to their abilities?" For as long as the kibbutz's existence hung by a thread, everyone was required to work as much as they possibly could, but at a time of greater ease, is it fair to give the painter a day for painting or to give the poet a day to write poetry? Is it legitimate to give people with aging parents who live far away time off to care for them? Second, how much is "according to their needs?" For as long as resources were very limited, there was a relatively clear sense of how to divide them fairly, but when there was more to give one inevitably had to decide how much is reasonable for people to take. Amnon Shamosh of kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch tells a story that illustrates this predicament particularly well:

> We had this nice young man who used to work in the fishponds. He had a big head of curly hair, and he always lost combs in the ponds. In the kibbutz's supply store combs were given freely alongside soap, toothpaste, toilet paper, things like that. One would simply go in and take what one needed. The person who was in charge of the supply store saw that this guy was taking one comb after another after another—and so an agenda item was brought before the kibbutz assembly: whether and how we limit the number of combs that a person can take [...] But there was a greater issue at stake. Should we set limitations for things that are to be free for all? In that case, we should also limit soap, we should also limit condoms![102]

In an attempt to regulate what each and every member could get from the kibbutz and what each and every member should give to the kibbutz, kibbutzim began to generate endless bylaws and rules and subrules and protocols about every conceivable issue: bicycles and weddings and underwear and records and toys and guests and umbrellas and interior design and everything else. Consider, for example, how home furnishings were to be allocated in kibbutz Kfar Masaryk based on the length of one's tenure in the kibbutz (according to an assembly decision from 1961):

- An unmarried person who has lived in the kibbutz for five years is entitled to a bed, a mattress, a table, two chairs, a lampshade, a kerosene heater, a table lamp, a vase, an electric kettle, an alarm clock, and a small portable radio.
- A married couple that has lived in the kibbutz for five years is entitled to all of the above plus a wall hanging.
- After thirteen years, one is also entitled to three vases and a toaster.
- After eighteen years, one is also entitled to a serving cart.[103]

The rules pertained not only to the allocation of goods but also to the orchestration and function of all the services in the kibbutz. How many times a month can members have their sheets washed? How many times can they have their clothes washed? On which day of the week should one bring dirty laundry to be washed, and on which day of the week should one collect clean laundry? How many people should be working in the dining hall at a time? What food items should members be allowed to take for themselves and what food items should be dispensed by the dining hall workers? Should members be allowed to take food into their rooms, and if so, what food? Should members fill a table or should they be able to sit wherever they want? What newspapers and magazines should be made available to the members? How long should each member be allowed to spend with a magazine before handing it over to the next member?

Communal dining hall in kibbutz Sha'ar HaAmakim, early 1960s.

The inclination to create a protocol for every single aspect of everyday life—at times ad absurdum—is perhaps best demonstrated by an agenda item that was

brought to the general assembly's vote in Degania sometime in the 1960s, a suggestion for a "sidewalks protocol." The suggestion included rules such as (1) refraining from standing and chatting on the sidewalk so as not to obstruct traffic; (2) keeping to the right side of the sidewalk; (3) saying "good morning" and "good evening" when coming across one another on the sidewalk; (4) avoiding littering; and (5) picking up whatever trash one finds on the sidewalk.[104] It appears that this suggestion was not adopted, and Degania's members decided that they could negotiate the complexities of the sidewalks without a protocol.

The ever-growing list of rules and regulations had a stifling effect. On the one hand people felt that trivial decisions that each member should be able to make for themselves were heavily bureaucratized and made cumbersome; one had to go through multiple committees and assemblies just to replace some broken tiles in their bathroom or to keep a birthday gift from their uncle. On the other hand, people felt that rules that were meant to ensure fairness and equality actually hindered fairness and achieved the opposite effect. As Tamar Reiner tells,

> I could get a new dress once every two years [...] Alas, I was pregnant in a year when it was not my turn to get a dress. Innocently, I asked the one in charge of the clothing supplies for appropriately sized dress and underwear. The underwear problem was solved, but as for the dress, she told me, "No one will give up their turn for a new dress for your sake." A relative from Tel Aviv who had just given birth gave me her maternity dress. It may be terribly petty, but I remember this event to this day. I also remember putting up with it at the time without uncalled-for resentment. I told myself that it was not that important. Not that important, but still remembered after fifty years. There was no longer an objective justification for pettiness and stinginess, but the absurd idea that you could regulate every detail of a member's life still prevailed.[105]

The attempt to "regulate every detail of a member's life" was not only the cause of much disdain and unhappiness among kibbutz members but also a consequence of their dissatisfaction. These rules and regulations were put in place, among other reasons, because without being monitored or forced many kibbutz members were no longer willing to pay the price for community and equality that they were once willing—and even happy—to pay. The erosion of the voluntaristic and altruistic drive was not just a result of materialism or self-indulgence, which were the consequences of the reviled "Americanization" that had taken over Israeli society as a whole in those years. Nor was it, as some kibbutz members argued, a direct result of the fact that women, with their "innate bourgeois tendencies," had a greater voice in the decision-making processes than they did in the past (although admittedly many of the changes pertaining to home furnishings and comforts were lobbied for mostly by women). This erosion was due primarily to the fact that communalism and self-sacrifice failed to give the younger generation

in the kibbutzim the same sense of personal value and meaning that it gave to their parents.

Ironically, all these painstaking regulations were needed because the kibbutz was remarkably successful in creating individuals who entrusted most of their agency to the collective. The first generation, that of the founders who transformed their lives willfully and through much strife, made a commitment to live by the collective will with the feeling that they were actively shaping it. Their sons and daughters, who reached maturity in the 1960s and 1970s, were born into a system that they did not actively choose and in which they did not have much agency—not because they have given it up but because they never had it to begin with. As Moshe Shner astutely diagnosed, these circumstances created people who, in Freud's terms, were either all id or all super ego. They were either all impulses and desires, wanting things and expecting the kibbutz to provide them, or they were playing an authoritarian and supervisory role, telling others what to do and chastising them for wanting too much. The less members were able or willing to self-regulate, the more the kibbutz had to regulate them, and the more the kibbutz regulated them, the less they were able to self-regulate.[106]

Indeed, it is notable that in a society that was so committed to and deliberate about the individual's duty to contribute to the collective, individuals came to have very little opportunity to do something for others or for the greater good of their own accord. When there is a committee in charge of visiting the sick, no one has to take the initiative to visit a sick person, and when there is a strict protocol on when it is "fair" for members to get a new dress, no one would give up a dress for a pregnant neighbor. The expectation was for one to live by the rules, not to outdo them. It was extremely uncommon and almost shameful to volunteer to do anything in the kibbutz; the norm was for one to say, "I don't mind" when asked, not to take initiative. A member of Beit HaShita described a poignant interaction with her mother, who was not a kibbutz member, around this issue:

> My mother was here one time on National Cancer Day [when donations for cancer research and treatments are collected]. She prepared two hundred lira and kept asking me when they would come to collect the money. I told her that the treasurer gave the money for the entire kibbutz, and she didn't get it. Why should the treasurer do that? Each member has a certain allocation of funds, so why should they not be the ones to make the donations? There was certainly something to her consternation. As though the people in the kibbutz assume no moral responsibility for their own lives.[107]

Think about it: to live in such a way that you either take what you want without asking (like combs), or you have to ask especially for what you want and may be refused (like clothing), or you have to wait for a special occasion to get something (like a radio), and in the meantime someone else pays all the bills, is to live forever like a child. It may be very comfortable and pleasant for some, but for

others this eventually eats away at their sense of self-worth and makes them frustrated and restless.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there were members of the younger generation of the kibbutzim who wanted more than ice cream and the right to pick their own sofas; they wanted meaning and a purpose. In a state of comfort and relative prosperity, they wanted what their parents had in a state of poverty: a feeling that they were doing something important, that they were living up to their maximum potential as human beings and giving something genuine to the collective—not just the requisite number of hours in the cowshed or in the kitchen. This quest for meaning, however, was often perceived as frivolous and self-indulgent, not substantively different than a quest for ice cream.

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A key element of the Zionist-socialist vision that stood at the foundation of the kibbutz was "overturning the pyramid of the Jewish people." Throughout the many centuries when the Jewish people lived without a territory of their own—or so went the argument—their existence had been anomalous in comparison to that of all other nations: a majority of intellectuals, professionals, and tradesmen, and only a few farmers and manual laborers. To re-normalize the Jewish people, it was necessary to "overturn the pyramid" so that the majority of the people would be peasants and blue-collar workers. Faithful to this doctrine, the founders of the kibbutz adopted a strong anti-intellectual ethos. Physical labor was the most sacred of values, whereas intellectual or artistic activities were considered side interests at best, or were looked down upon as traces of bourgeois living at worst. Avraham Shlonsky (1900–1973), a celebrated Hebrew poet who was a member of Ein Harod in its early years, described how he kept the fact that he was writing poems a secret, sharing it only with his cousin in Tel Aviv. Alas, the cousin sent one of the poems to someone, who sent it to someone else, and eventually the poem was published, much to Shlonsky's horror, in the newspaper. The contempt and castigation to which he was subject in the kibbutz thereafter abated only when he led the kibbutz's soccer team to victory in a game against the neighboring kibbutz.[108]

One of the most cited manifestos of the kibbutz movement was a portion of a speech that Moshe Wald gave at a convention of HaShomer HaTza'ir in Poland in 1918: "We want to educate a hard and strong generation, not a drifting generation that wanders in imagination. Our youth needs to prepare for a life of labor and to know its role here [in exile] and there, in the land of the fathers. It is all uncultivated land and rocks, sands, and deserts—only the arm of Hercules will do this work, not poets or prophets [...] Not pens, paper, and ink [are needed now], not confessions and pouring out of one's soul, but rather saws, axes, hoes, and above all hands! Give us hands! First and foremost, hands!"[109] It may be worth noting that Moshe Wald, who had a doctorate from Vienna University in law and

political science, later held an administrative position in the municipality of Tel Aviv and held neither a hoe nor an axe a single day in this life. His brother Meir Ya'ari (*ya'ar* is the Hebrew translation for *Wald*, "forest" in German), however, took this speech very seriously (and for years to come, claimed to have authored the speech himself). Ya'ari was rumored to throw anyone who was caught playing a musical instrument out of HaShomer HaTza'ir.

Wald/Ya'ari's "First and foremost, hands!" plea and the ethos that it captured achieved their mission—at least in the sphere of the kibbutzim. The founders spoke and wrote against intellectualism and unproductive occupations, but they did so with ample quotations from Marx and from Freud, from Tolstoy and from the Talmud, whereas their children spoke little and wrote almost nothing, and they certainly did not quote. Schoolwork and book learning were not held in high regard in the kibbutzim; there were no tests and no report cards, nor were there many ways for children who were good at something to develop their talents further. Children who showed a keen interest in an area of study or were avid readers were often ridiculed. One of the worst insults you could be called in a kibbutz was *tilignat*, which was a purposeful mispronunciation of the word "intelligent." People whose occupations within the kibbutz were "white collar"—teachers, librarians, bookkeepers—were often ashamed to enter the communal dining hall with clean clothes and shoes when those who had been doing "real" work would sit there in blue work clothes filthy with grease and mud.

The second generation of the kibbutz was dismissive not only of intellectual pursuits for their own sake but also of what the first generation lived and breathed constantly—philosophizing and poeticizing about the kibbutz itself. Questions of Zionism, socialism, vocation, destiny, the individual, society, justice, spirit, class, nation, and so forth were considered boring and vacuous by most younger kibbutz members, and heartfelt descriptions of the beauty of the sunset over the mountains or of the shimmering gold of the fully grown wheat were seen as pathetic substitutes for actual work. Yizhar Smilansky, in his novel *The Days of Ziklag*, expressed this mindset incisively:

> They [the founders] needed a pretty word or justification out of some book to get over themselves and work hard, whereas we were born into it, and we need neither words nor a book. We are already in it, we know how to work and how to do everything, we don't need emotion or feelings anymore—and we produce twice as much. [...] I like it. I like coming back home tired and dusty, taking a shower and eating well, and being home. I'm good with an extended day of work, I don't understand what all the whining is about. [...] Me? Has someone with a face like mine read A.D. Gordon [the spiritual leader of the Labor Movement]? I just like working on the tractor all day long in the sun.[110]

The founders' generation looked at their sons and daughters, native to the land and born to kibbutz life, with a combination of admiration and disappointment. Admiration because this generation was what they always wanted to be—tanned, strong, confident, at ease at work, fluent in Hebrew, unencumbered by the legacies of exile and antisemitism—and disappointment because the younger generation was lacking in revolutionary consciousness for the simple reason that they had nothing to rebel against. As one prominent kibbutz founder put it (the saying is attributed to several different people), "We wanted to raise heretics, but we raised ignoramuses." Meaning, we wanted to create people who would reject the old world that we rejected, but we created people who don't even know what their parents rejected. That, in a nutshell, is the paradox of conservative revolutionism, namely, the idea that revolutions should be perpetual yet unchanging.

The leadership of the kibbutzim championed the ideal of a physically healthy and psychologically uncomplicated worker whose attachment to the land was natural and did not require much thinking or deliberating. However, it also valued education as the most essential tool to instill kibbutz values and to create ideological consciousness and continuity. In a sense, the kibbutzim upheld a model of self-defeating education—dedicating significant resources to educating people who would have no need for this education and would even look down upon it. To that end, the different kibbutz movements created independent institutions of higher learning, primarily to train teachers and youth counselors but sometimes also to offer professionalization in other kibbutz-serving occupations. Training in these institutions was usually short—between a few weeks and one year—and importantly, these institutions did not provide those who attended them with any kind of degree. Indeed, the very idea of an academic degree or certificate was rebuffed in the kibbutzim as bourgeois honor-seeking individualism. For a long time, high schools in the kibbutzim did not even enable their students to take the standardized high school graduation tests that were necessary to matriculate in a university. Gradually throughout the 1960s and 1970s, kibbutzim began to align their high school curricula so that those who wished to do so would be able to take the state graduation tests (especially when it turned out that the lack of a high school diploma could negatively impact one's prospects of advancement in the military).

But even when it was in theory possible for kibbutz members to matriculate in universities, one could not seek higher education without approval (and more importantly, financial support) from the relevant committee in one's kibbutz and from the kibbutz's assembly, and they were very reluctant to approve any course of study that was not immediately and palpably useful for the kibbutz. Even members seeking educational trajectories that would be useful for the kibbutz in the long term, such as medicine or veterinary medicine, were often refused. A kibbutz member who was going to be away from their kibbutz for five, six, or seven years, they were told, could no longer be considered a kibbutz member upon

their return—if they even were to return. The only two career paths that were encouraged and supported despite the fact that they took one out of the kibbutz for extensive periods of time were military and political—perhaps because those who pursued these paths never presented them as careers but rather as a selfless concession one was making for the greater good of the nation and the movement.

Those who were eager to attend university or to pursue an intellectual or artistic passion usually had two options. One option was to leave the kibbutz altogether, which was much more difficult than it sounds. Keep in mind that when a kibbutz member left, they left with nothing since nothing belonged to them, and if their parents were also kibbutz members, they had nothing to give to their children. The material difficulty was compounded by the emotional difficulty of knowing that one was causing one's parents and the kibbutz as a whole shame and heartache and that one would be a not-entirely-welcome guest if they were ever to come back for a visit. The other option was to stay and to pursue these passions quietly after working hours, to the extent that the kibbutz made it possible. In the 1960s, for the first time young members began to wonder, audibly, whether there was a third option, whether one could achieve personal and professional fulfillment *in* the kibbutz and live up to one's potential as a unique individual, not just as a cog in the kibbutz machine. Those who raised this issue and advocated for greater flexibility and room for individuality talked about the need for self-realization, in Hebrew, *mimush atzmi*. Those who ridiculed them and dismissed their concerns as self-indulgent and egotistic called it *mishmush atzmi*, "self-rummaging"—a euphemism for masturbation.

Feelings of restlessness and frustration and a sense of futility and ennui were even more pronounced among young women in the kibbutz than they were among men, although women tended to be less vocal about it. Whereas men could at least excel in arduous but prestigious kibbutz jobs such as agriculture or industry (and of course, in the military), the overwhelming majority of women in the kibbutzim worked either in the kitchen or in childcare, tedious and demanding jobs that received no social recognition. That facet of kibbutz life, generally speaking, had not changed since the 1920s, and in some respects it became worse; the more the kibbutzim grew and prospered, the more members they had, and the more members they had, the more mouths there were to feed and the more children there were to care for collectively. These services could not be dispensed with, and women had to put up serious fights if they wanted to be dispatched to different kinds of work, let alone venture outside the kibbutz for a while. In an interview conducted in 1978, one woman of Beit HaShita expressed her dismay—and one could even say her despair—at this situation:

> I worked in childcare for close to twenty years with a few short breaks here and there. I found no satisfaction in this work, and now I see those years as a nightmare [...] In the beginning I worked with three-year-olds, inside four walls. You feel like you're becoming increasingly aggravated, like you're

> atrophying and soon your own brain will be on par with that of the three-year-olds. In addition to physical exhaustion, there's genuine mental exhaustion. My nerves were raw from all their screaming and all their nagging. I worked eight or nine hours a day (now they work only seven) and I felt like I was sacrificing myself. [...] All that time I felt terrible at work, especially with the toddlers, and I kept going all these years because of my conscience. I knew that I had four children of my own so I had to contribute to childcare, and they always told me that there aren't enough caretakers and every female member who is able must work in childcare [...] People say, "It's easy to raise children in the kibbutz, it's not a problem," but that's nonsense. You work for eight hours with children who are *not* yours, and in the afternoon you get to your room, completely spent, and then you have to start taking care of your own children and be a mother to them. That's absurd. And all that after the kibbutz wanted to liberate women from their traditional roles![111]

For a relatively small but in many ways impactful group of young people in the kibbutzim, the quest for self-realization on a personal level attested to a greater and more profound need for meaning and spiritual direction for the kibbutz as a whole. Avraham Shapira of kibbutz Yizre'el was probably the first to identify this issue, to start a conversation around it, and to create new platforms to work through it. Shapira and the circle that formed around him observed that young kibbutz members were not seeking ways to grow and develop as individuals simply out of some bourgeois drive to succeed and achieve but rather because they really wanted to be able to give something to the community that they cherished—but felt like they had nothing of substance to give. When people feel empty inside—or, as Eli Alon put it, "tanned, but mentally pale"—they cannot form a true partnership with others because they do not have anything to bring *into* the partnership.[112] Thus, young people felt like they were living in the kibbutz as a place and as a structure, but they did not feel what the founders felt in every vein of their bodies—that the kibbutz was their creation.

Avraham Shapira along with other like-minded individuals from other kibbutzim was the founder of a unique entity called Shdemot Circle that attempted to enable spiritual, intellectual, and psychological growth in the kibbutzim. Its main publication was a modest journal called *Shdemot Notebook*, which included opinion pieces, short stories, poems, and contemplative essays—mostly by kibbutz members but sometimes also by other writers they admired, both dead and alive. The journal started as a collection of educational materials for teachers and youth counsellors with the thought that they would use it to have meaningful conversations in the classroom and beyond, but it soon became a self-standing publication. Shdemot Circle did not confine itself only to the journal but also initiated conversations in kibbutzim everywhere in the country during which

young kibbutz members were encouraged to talk openly about their concerns, frustrations, and desires.

Three things were remarkable about Shdemot Circle. First, it did not align with any existing kibbutz movement or party. In fact, it argued that the division of the kibbutzim according to political and ideological alignments was obsolete and should be put to rest. Second, Shdemot Circle put significant emphasis on classical Jewish texts and encouraged a Jewish (albeit secular) revival in the kibbutzim, in which traditional materials that were once discarded would be reclaimed and given new and vital interpretations. Moreover, it championed an idea that has been a pillar of Jewish life for centuries but had been an anathema in the kibbutzim—that studying and reading together on a regular basis are necessary to give a community substance and meaning. Finally, Shdemot Circle did not attempt to develop a new ideology to replace those that had gone stale but rather to propagate an approach that was suspicious toward all ideologies. Rather than idealistic zeal, it encouraged introspection, doubt, creativity, and deeper connection with oneself, with others, and with one's cultural heritage.

Shdemot Circle had a limited impact during the 1960s. The people associated with it were often mocked as naval-gazing and soft, as talkers rather than doers, who offered endless rumination rather than practical solutions. At the time, they were not necessarily trying to have a widespread impact. As Yariv Ben-Aharon of kibbutz Giv'at Hayim put it, "We went looking for the individuals [...] Our emphasis was on those sensitive and creative individuals whom the system oppresses or spits out or otherwise denies the legitimacy of their inner world."[113] In the long run, however, Shdemot Circle did prove a catalyst for processes that transformed the kibbutz as a whole and steered it to give individuals more space to grow, learn, and express themselves. By the 1970s, most kibbutzim began to support and encourage their members to pursue higher education, and kibbutz organizations started offering various classes and workshops to allow members to pursue a variety of interests. Shdemot Circle also played a pivotal role in legitimizing psychotherapy and emotional support in the kibbutzim and more generally in re-examining some of the kibbutz's institutions and practices through the lens of psychological well-being. Finally, Shdemot Circle was the driving force that turned the educational institutions of the kibbutzim into vibrant centers of secular Jewish renewal. That was an ironic twist of fate: as all the things the kibbutz initially stood for—communality, self-management, self-reliance, and physical labor—were rapidly discarded, the things that it originally rejected—immersion in Jewish texts and intellectual self-exploration—would become its greatest and most enduring cultural asset.

The Six-Day War of 1967 was a transformative moment for Israeli society. It was also a transformative moment for the kibbutz, but not necessarily in the same

direction as that of the state as a whole. For three weeks—from May 15 to June 4, 1967—the State of Israel was getting ready for what Egypt, Syria, and Jordan were promising would be its complete and final annihilation. Public parks were dug up with the expectation that they would be used as mass gravesites for hundreds of thousands of casualties. The prime minister, Levi Eshkol, stammered while giving a live public address on the radio. There was a sense of panic and doom everywhere.

The war eventually began on June 5 and was held on three fronts—on the north, with Syria; on the south, with Egypt; and on the East, with Jordan. The war ended on June 11 with a glorious, stunning Israeli victory—not only with a smashing defeat of the opposing forces but also with newly acquired territories that more than tripled the area of the tiny country: the Golan heights in the north, east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the east, Gaza and the enormous Sinai Peninsula in the south. Israel was intoxicated with power, admired itself, and was (at least for a while) admired by the world. In the torrent of victory parties and victory albums and posters of generals on every street corner, the three weeks of terror preceding the war and the losses and horrors of the war itself were quickly forgotten.

But the kibbutzim did not forget. With so many of them located on border areas of the state, they knew that they would be the first to be attacked, and the waiting period was experienced as a time of dread and helplessness that brought back traumatic memories—not only of the 1948 war, but also, for some, of the Holocaust. The younger men of the kibbutzim between the ages of eighteen and forty were called to military service through an emergency draft, leaving women, children, and the elderly to fend for themselves. And when those men came back from the war—and not all of them came back—many of them came back different, silent. An initiative of Shdemot Circle to hold open conversations with kibbutz members who fought in the war and to record them revealed the extent to which people were wounded not only by the horrors of battle, by blood and fire and loss of limbs and loss of friends, but also by what they found themselves doing to the other side. People spoke of their profound identification with the captives they took, of seeing dead bodies and having no way of knowing whether they were "ours" or "theirs," of a fear of killing no less crippling than the fear of being killed. It is perhaps on account of these kinds of experiences—and the newfound readiness to talk about them—that the kibbutz movement played very little part in the new settlement frenzy that washed over Israel in the 1970s. There were very few kibbutz ventures into the new occupied territories, in stark contrast to the aftermath of the 1948 war. The establishment of Jewish settlements in the West Bank became the domain of a different group, the religious right, which in large part would replace the kibbutz at the arrowhead of the Zionist enterprise.

Yet 1967 also brought to the kibbutzim something new and refreshing: a deluge of young volunteers from Europe, South America, the United States, and Canada, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. These volunteers were enchanted with the

proud and victorious little state, a David to the world's Goliath, and came to spend a few months in the coolest thing that state had invented, the kibbutz. Room and board were included, and work was not all that hard; volunteers were mostly given simple and monotonous factory or farming jobs for four or five hours a day at most, after which they were free to do as they wished. There were swimming pools and vast, green lawns, it was almost always sunny, and the stringent rules of communality and austerity were not imposed on the volunteers who came as admiring guests rather than as aspiring members. Almost half a million volunteers worked in various kibbutzim between 1967 and 1990, among them household names such as Senator Bernie Sanders, photographer Annie Leibovitz, comedian Jerry Seinfeld, actress Helen Mirren, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and actor Sacha Baron Cohen.

Volunteers from Denmark in kibbutz Dafna, 1964.

Keen interest in volunteer work in the kibbutzim emerged already in the late 1950s, primarily in Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Sweden, and to a lesser extent Norway. It was perhaps the strong socialist-democratic penchant of these countries, alongside their residents' insatiable thirst for sun and warmth, that can account for the heightened interest in the kibbutz in those nations in particular. In the early 1960s, volunteer enterprises were scattered and self-driven: those who were interested had to make contact and arrangements themselves and usually arrived as individuals or in pairs. Kibbutzim did not object, but they also did not

actively encourage volunteer work. After 1967, however, the interest on both sides grew tremendously. The kibbutzim felt a dire shortage of working hands, especially since the Six-Day War, the War of Attrition that followed it, and the Yom Kippur War in 1973 engaged the younger men of the kibbutzim in active military service much of the time. The prospect of bolstering the workforce without dirtying the kibbutz's hands with exploitative hired labor was compelling. The hype around Israel following the 1967 war, combined with the sixties' spirit of seeking love and justice and freedom, made the kibbutz seem like a utopia on earth to idealistic young people abroad. Richard Mühlrad, who founded the organization SVEKIV (short for *Svenska kibbutzvänner*—"Swedish friends of the kibbutz"), mentioned that in the 1970s, the number of volunteers was so high that it was a real challenge to place them all in kibbutzim: "The supply was greater than the demand. I remember times, especially in January when the number of volunteers was at its height, when we had to drive around from kibbutz to kibbutz asking, 'Take one, two, three, four, please.'"[114]

Austrian volunteers in kibbutz Ein HaShofet, 1973.

International volunteers were drawn to the kibbutzim for a wide range of reasons. For some of the Jewish ones, the motivation was strictly Zionist, in the

spirit of "the State of Israel needs us, so we're coming!" For others, it was mostly about traveling and experiencing a different culture at minimal expense—and the hosting kibbutzim did make a point of organizing trips for the volunteers and showing them a pretty good time. Some volunteers had a serious and sustained interest in communal life and considered the kibbutz a useful training and research ground toward building their own communes in their home countries. For many others it was an escape from whatever was not working in their lives back home—failed university exams, romance gone awry, or unemployment. The kibbutzim were wary of volunteers using the kibbutz as a temporary refuge from their troubles, but the organizations that coordinated the volunteers openly sought such people out. For example, during a period of soaring unemployment in Britain from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, opportunities for volunteer work in kibbutzim were advertised in local employment agencies.

Volunteers were treated with a mixture of affection and suspicion. They were well liked for their enthusiasm, genuineness, and for the implicit promise that upon their return to their home countries they would serve as "ambassadors of good will" for the State of Israel. There were, however, concerns about the volunteers' light-hearted approach to life in general and kibbutz life in particular. In those years of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, Israeli society still had an ethos of asceticism, cultural purism, and idealism. No one in the kibbutzim drank alcohol in the 1960s except on special occasions like the Sabbath or during a wedding, rock and pop music were considered vulgar and lowbrow, and folk dancing in a circle was the only legitimate kind of dance. The volunteers gave kibbutzniks in their teens and twenties a taste of what it was like to be young in "normal" places—often to the chagrin of the older generation. Many kibbutz members had their first beer or their first joint in the volunteer's club and listened for the first time to the Beatles, the Doors, or Pink Floyd in volunteers' rooms. In one kibbutz, the volunteers decided that kibbutz members were too uptight and baked hash brownies in massive quantities—which the unsuspecting kibbutzniks devoured without realizing what was going on.[115]

Sex was a more complicated issue. The kibbutzim, generally speaking, were erotic wastelands. This was due both to the ideological imperative that all selfish desires are to be repressed (or as they called it back then, "sublimated") and to the fact that kibbutz people spent their entire childhood and youth with the same small group of people with whom they had sibling-like relations. The volunteers were usually much freer in their sexual behavior and many of them considered sexual liaisons (among themselves and with kibbutz folks) to be part of the fun. One member of kibbutz Mishmar HaSharon openly said that if it were not for the female volunteers, half the boys in the kibbutz would still be virgins.[116] Female volunteers were stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, and in some places they were taken to be "treats" for hardworking male kibbutz members—not necessarily with their full realization or consent. In one kibbutz, for example, volunteer girls who were sent to work in the dishwashing room—a job that generally made one's

clothes soaked and dirty almost right away—were told that it was customary to show up to this work wearing a bikini. The Israeli cult movie *Mivtza Savta* (*Operation Grandma*, 1999) includes an iconic scene in which a cocky kibbutznik approaches a gorgeous young volunteer in the swimming pool and says in broken English and a thick Israeli accent, "You want to come to my room? Cup of coffee, fuck of tea?"

There was true romance as well, of course, with kibbutz members and volunteers falling in love and sometimes getting married. It is estimated that there were about 1,100 such marriages in the 1970s alone. The kibbutzim were not thrilled about this prospect, to say the least. Since most volunteers were not interested in committing to kibbutz life forever, there was a good chance that the foreigner would eventually take their spouse with them to their home country. In cases in which the volunteer did want to stay and become a permanent kibbutz member, if the volunteer was not Jewish the question of conversion to Judaism arose. As much as the kibbutzim were staunchly secular, many of them were not very open to the possibility of having non-Jewish members. Even if the volunteer was willing to convert, however, most Orthodox rabbis (the only rabbis authorized to perform a conversion process in Israel) would hear the word "kibbutz" and show the applicant the door. Despite all these hurdles, there were volunteers who chose to stay and created a life for themselves in kibbutzim—sometimes staying there well after their relationship with the local kibbutz member had ended and after that kibbutz member whom they originally followed had already left the kibbutz in search of their own path.

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The enhancement and prioritization of the private home as well as the growing willingness—albeit often begrudgingly—to accommodate members' individual preferences, interests, abilities, and concerns, would eventually lead to the most dramatic and controversial transformation in kibbutz life: ending the communal sleeping arrangements and having children sleep in their parents' apartments. This process unfolded over a long period of time, first with surreptitious arrangements and ad hoc exceptions (letting a child sleep with their parents on special occasions or if they had major psychological issues), then with a de facto desertion of the children's houses, and finally with de jure kibbutz votes to end communal sleeping for children. While the last kibbutzim to give up communal sleeping did so only in the 1990s, the roots of this seismic change undoubtedly trace to the 1960s and 1970s, a time when more and more kibbutz members—and especially kibbutz women—began to challenge the system's most deep-seated axioms in a quest for personal and individual fulfillment. Greater openness to the world outside the kibbutz, both in Israel and beyond it, played a key part in this process. Perhaps for the first time, kibbutz members told themselves that their

lives were not normal and not suited for the natural inclinations of human beings—and they did not mean that as a compliment.

7

The Messiah Isn't Coming

1980–1999

All pains turn white as the cotton blossoms,
A big black cloud rises in the west.
Helpless, you stand on the ground below,
To see your work destroyed.
You will not pray, you need no handkerchief,
You got a spot—well, go make the most of it!

They say that all streams flow to the sea,
But not all streams reach it, some have no exit.
Closing on wandering sands brought by the wind,
Day after day after day, and behold—a swamp.
Kind to mosquitoes, good for a forsaken place,
But is this the spot? If I find it, what will I find? [...]

The check bounced again,
Call Schtacher, you know, the one from Loans and Savings,
He may have an emergency fund so we could buy seeds.
Call Madvetzky, will you?
We may have to sell another truck to eat
In a shack that is scorching in the summer and leaking in the winter for another year.
One piece of advice after another, eating half an egg,
And sowing in the swamp again.[117]

In 1983, Meir Ariel (1942–1999) was appointed secretary of his kibbutz, Mishmarot. Ariel, an avant-garde poet and musician who was deeply respected by critics but had little commercial success, was in many ways the worst

kibbutz member you could imagine. He was a terrible worker who had a reputation for destroying every vehicle he was entrusted with, he was chronically late, smoked weed on a daily basis, and often took time off to pursue creative activities or to sort out the chaos in his life. Nevertheless, he was well liked in his kibbutz, appreciated for his unique personality and talents, and was given the space and time—not to mention the financial safety net—to pursue his eccentricities. In turn, he dutifully gave every penny he made as an artist to the kibbutz. The thought of leaving the kibbutz crossed his mind many times ("More than once I wished that Mishmarot would simply explode and be gone the next day," he said already in 1969),[118] but he was deeply attached to it and also doubted—rightfully—his ability to support himself and his family in any other way. The fact that a man like Meir Ariel was chosen in 1983 to serve in the foremost leadership position in his kibbutz (kibbutz secretary is equivalent to a director or chairperson) tells you something about the idiosyncratic nature of Mishmarot, a kibbutz that was more anarchic and individualistic than most, but it is also indicative of the crisis in the kibbutzim in the mid-1980s more broadly. During that time, it became harder and harder to find people who would serve in leadership positions. Those who fully understood the depth of the kibbutz's problems were reluctant to take on what seemed like a hopeless task, and those who did not fully understand the depth of the kibbutz's problems usually also lacked the skills and charisma to take the lead. Mishmarot was in a dire situation when Meir Ariel took on the role of secretary in 1983, and it was in worse condition when he ended his term in 1985. In 1986, Ariel and his family left the kibbutz for good.

The distress and existential dread of the 1980s in Mishmarot found their way to one of Meir Ariel's most beautiful songs, "Bass Babloon." Bass Babloon was the name of a swamp area near Mishmarot (Ariel interpreted the name as Arabic for "the swamp of Babylon," although evidently this is not the meaning of the name; the origin of the name remains uncertain). In this song, Ariel ties together the iconic struggles of the founders of the kibbutz, who had trouble growing anything in the plot of land they received because of drainage problems and shifting sands, with the financial struggles of his own time: the need for more and more loans that could not be repaid, the need to call in favors from bankers and government officials, the fear that soon everything would collapse beyond repair. The founders' determination not to pray and not to cry compelled the second generation to keep on sowing in the swamp, even though they knew that nothing was likely to grow, with the hope that the pain would dissipate when the cotton blossomed. The first generation's uncertainties—Can we make something of this place? Will we even be here next year?—are mirrored in the second generation's uncertainties—What will become of us if we stay? What will become of us if we go?

Mishmarot, a small kibbutz whose agricultural and industrial ventures were never very profitable, was one of the very first kibbutzim to go through privatization—that is, it ceased to function as a commune. Privatization took place

(and is still taking place in some kibbutzim) in three stages: first, privatization of services, with members now paying for services they used to receive freely (such as food, laundry, electricity, and use of vehicles); second, privatization of salaries, with individuals' expendable funds now proportional to their personal income (also known as "differentiation of salaries"); and finally, the privatization of real estate, when kibbutz members are listed as owners of their houses. The process of privatization in the kibbutzim began slowly but dramatically in the early 1990s and continued steadily into the twenty-first century.

The story of the kibbutz in the last two decades of the twentieth century lends itself all too easily to a "decline and fall" narrative. Demographically speaking, the kibbutzim shrank during these decades from about 3.5 percent of the Jewish population in Israel to 1.5 percent. As the first generation was dying, the third generation was departing en masse. Among those born in the kibbutzim in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, leaving immediately after one's military service became the norm. In terms of their status and standing in Israeli society, the kibbutzim turned from the chosen sons, the idyllic picture of all that was good and right and beautiful in the small and brave country, into a target of resentment and contempt. The loss of public and political favor translated into a withdrawal of financial support from the kibbutzim (and, some say, into fiscal policies deliberately meant to harm the kibbutzim), which led to an economic collapse. Most important, the ideological infrastructure on which the kibbutz was based—sharing of all resources, rejection of private property, communal self-management, "from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs"—had fallen apart, either partially or entirely. By the early 2000s, dozens of articles, books, documentaries, and op-eds featured titles like "A Eulogy for the Kibbutz," "The Kibbutz is Dead," "Kibbutz, the End," "The Burial of the Kibbutz," et cetera. Footage of empty communal dining halls, in which only a few eighty- and ninety-year-olds eat soup silently and morosely, replaced pictures of beautiful Swedish volunteers picking oranges as the iconic image of the kibbutz.

While those eulogies of the early 2000s were, in retrospect, premature, there is no denying that they came on the heels of a series of crises so profound and so all-encompassing that the possibility that the kibbutz had died, or was about to die, loomed larger in the kibbutzim and beyond than ever before. It was a collective moment of reckoning in which the questions "what happened to us" and "how did we get here" were asked over and over again. The answers varied widely, oftentimes based on one's earning potential in the new reality of the privatized or semi-privatized kibbutz, as well as on one's own personal and family history within their kibbutz. Some looked back in anger or remorse, decrying the mistakes and bad decisions of the ancestors that made the kibbutz unsustainable in the long run; others looked back longingly and mourned the decline of the generations, how the majestic work of the selfless fathers and mothers was brought to ruin by their selfish children; still others laid the blame outside the kibbutz, pointing to political changes in Israel and worldwide, saying that it was the times that had

changed and that the storm was too fierce for the kibbutz to withstand. One way or another, the blossoming cotton could hardly offer comfort anymore.

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Even before the dramatic privatization processes began in the 1990s, in large part as a result of the financial crisis of the 1980s, which will be discussed later, many kibbutzim were already moving toward a less stringent communal model, introducing structural changes that offered members greater flexibility and independence. Whereas in the traditional model one received everything from the kibbutz according to one's needs, with no room for personal choice or preference, starting in the 1970s kibbutzim began to utilize personal budgets for each member: a clothing budget, a home furnishing budget, a travel and vacation budget, and so forth, which allowed members to choose for themselves what and when to purchase. Later, the multiple personal budgets were replaced with a single inclusive budget—a lump sum for expenses that each member could use as they saw fit. People now spent much more time in their homes and much less in communal spaces—the arrival of private television sets certainly precipitated this change—and much of the work in the kibbutzim was done not by the members themselves but by hired laborers from Palestinian villages or from nearby development towns. All these changes were highly contentious, and they all unfolded (at a different pace in different kibbutzim) after tedious back-and-forth discussions and votes. But no change in the organization of and lifestyle in the kibbutzim was so controversial and drew so much public attention as the shift from communal sleeping of children in children's houses to children sleeping in their parents' homes. This process started in the late 1960s, continued in the 1970s and 1980s, and was completed in the early 1990s. The last kibbutz that held on to communal sleeping arrangements fiercely, Bar'am, gave it up in 1997.

The separation of children from their parents, especially during the night, always drew more attention than any other aspect of kibbutz life. This practice, it seemed, defied a human norm so deep-seated that it was identical with nature itself (what other animal hands its newborn over to another animal on the day that it's born?), and it posed a challenge to every existing psychological theory of attachment and emotional development, thus generating much curiosity and skepticism from outsiders. Kibbutz educators and psychologists fiercely defended this arrangement, claiming that it yielded emotionally healthy, self-sustaining kids who were well-suited for kibbutz life since they learned how to be independent and get along with others from a young age; that the interactions between parents and children in the kibbutz were so much more meaningful because they were not encumbered by household chores and the annoyances of feeding, bathing, disciplining, and getting up at night; and that it was much better for all sides involved to entrust childcare to highly skilled and experienced caretakers who knew what they were doing. For a long time, kibbutz members accepted these

arguments whether or not they or their children were personally comfortable with this arrangement.

What was it like to grow up in a communal children's house? An unending assortment of memoirs, novels, poems, short stories, interviews, artwork, films, psychological and anthropological studies, blogs, magazine articles, and even court records offer an ambivalent response: wonderful and awful. As anthropologist Tama Halfin observed, the response to this question depends on whether it is given in the first-person plural or the first-person singular.[119] Growing up in a kibbutz was wonderful for *us*—"we spent so much time out in nature, we had wonderful trips and plays and adventures, we were free and independent and had interesting things to do all the time"—but awful for *me*—"I was lonely, I was abused, I was full of fears, I had no one to turn to." In other words, it was a fantastic place to be a child who is part of a group but a terrible place to be a child as an individual—certainly for children who had more trouble fitting in for a variety of reasons, but really for any child whenever they needed privacy, experienced anxiety, dealt with rejection, wanted to be different, or just needed more adult attention and tenderness.

There were many difficult aspects to childhood in a kibbutz: constant pressure to comply and conform, forced intimacy with peers whom one did not necessarily like or get along with, total lack of privacy, little concern for one's desires or needs as an individual, and a revolving door of caretakers who could be cold, capricious, neglectful, rigid, or clueless. But the aspect that was deemed most traumatic of all and that usually sends shivers down people's spines was the fact that children were completely alone at night. To be clear, it is not only that they were not with their parents but that they were without any adults whatsoever. A "night watchperson" was assigned to be in charge of four or six children's houses. In the early days, the night watchperson would patrol between the houses; later on, there was an intercom installed in each house so that the watchperson would hear if anyone was crying or shouting or calling. Children with toothaches or earaches or stomachaches, children who threw up or wet their beds, children who had nightmares or were too frightened to fall asleep—they all had to figure it out for themselves at the age of three or four or five. Sometimes they cried for the watchperson, who either showed up or didn't show up. Sometimes they just endured the pain or the fear or the wet sheets until morning. Sometimes they ran away through the darkness and the wind and the jackals to their parents' room, who either immediately took them back to the children's house or compassionately allowed them to stay there (and were berated by the caretakers when they took them back in the morning). The children's houses were not locked; anyone could go in, from occasional child molesters to armed terrorists. Both these things happened.

It was not only the terror of being without adults at night but also the terror of always being with other children—who oftentimes, especially without adult

supervision, were as cruel and unhinged as children can be. As Nili Landsman (born 1966) of kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar relates:

> What I remember most is waking up in the middle of the night in the children's house with children laughing in the room, and I realize that maybe they did or didn't do something to me, maybe they saw or didn't see something, that mystery of "what happened during my sleep?" It's a moment…only after many years you fully understand it as a moment when you are denied the most basic right to privacy, as if it was cut off with a knife.[120]

The hardship of living in the children's house did not necessarily translate into wanting to live with one's parents. The physical separation between parents and children, especially in kibbutzim that were more adamant about separate sleeping, often translated into emotional separation as well. Yael Neeman (born 1960) of kibbutz Yehiam wrote that the first time she happened to see her father sleeping, she was sure that he was dead; she had never seen a sleeping adult before, and she found the sight disturbing, off-putting. The following anecdote from her memoir, *We Were the Future*, charts the distance between parents and children in the kibbutz incisively:

> My three older brothers and I were like guests in our parents' house. Our parents didn't know what size shoes we wore, and when I asked for wooden clogs with a blue stripe for my tenth birthday, they bought me a pair that was three sizes too large. When the clogs finally arrived after having been changed […] I had to take them off at the door [of the children's house]. They were too private and the stripe was too blue […] We never told our parents stories like the one about the demise of the clogs, maybe because we didn't want to sadden them. We, adults and children, lived in parallel universes, each universe with its own problems […] Our parents didn't know anything about our lives and we didn't know anything about theirs.[121]

For many years, the system was not questioned. Children born and raised in the kibbutz never knew anything else; parents either liked it, didn't mind it, or minded it but were too afraid to speak against one of the kibbutz's sacred principles. When it came, the revolution was a revolution of mothers, and it was a quiet revolution. Here and there, mothers started keeping their children at home during the weekend. Here and there, mothers insisted that they be the ones to take their children to the doctor or to buy their clothes. Here and there, mothers started taking their children home—sometimes just a few nights a week, but eventually never bringing them back to the children's house. Initially these were the mothers who were castigated as "hysterical," "over-protective," and "crazy," who were easier to leave alone than to deal with. Slowly, more and more mothers began to

have their children sleep at home on a regular basis. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 was a catalyst in the process; the fathers were away on military duty and the mothers took the children home so that they wouldn't have to run around between different children's houses in what was already a stressful situation. After the war, in quite a few kibbutzim the children simply stayed home. The same thing happened during the first Gulf War with the few kibbutzim that still practiced communal sleeping in 1991: parents took their children home as part of the emergency measures, and they never brought them back. Eventually, children's houses closed down for lack of demand; even parents who were still supporters of communal sleeping arrangements realized that their child would be one of only three or four children in the building.

As with everything in the kibbutz, the decision to eliminate communal sleeping arrangements had to be brought to assembly discussions and votes. The discussions were heated and painful. At stake was not only the ideological question—can we really step this far away from one of the most established principles of the kibbutz and still call ourselves a kibbutz?—but a much deeper, much more emotional question. The mothers who insisted that they wanted to be "real" mothers, who talked about how important it was to be there with their child when they wake up and fall asleep, who said that they missed their children all the time and that their children missed them, who said that they felt like their children grow up like orphans—those mothers were perceived as directly or indirectly accusing the other women (and oftentimes their own mothers) of not being "real" mothers, of abandoning their children to cry at night—and potentially to be molested and abused. This was different from the discussions about personal budgets or university tuition or hired labor; this was a painful conversation about the fundamentals of being human, of being a child and of being a parent. Mothers who raised their children in children's houses and never thought this was problematic were all of a sudden asked, publicly or privately, tacitly or directly, "How could you? What kind of a mother are you?"

In some kibbutzim (especially those with a larger proportion of older members), the majority voted to maintain communal sleeping arrangements. It didn't matter. Parents who were so inclined continued to have their children sleep in their own house and not much could be done about that. Eventually, those kibbutzim, too, decided that there was no point in trying to enforce something that parents were not interested in. In other kibbutzim, the majority voted to end communal sleeping arrangements. This, in turn, required significant reconstruction and renovation projects. It may be reasonable for a couple to live in an apartment of thirty square meters, but not for a family with two parents and three children. Apartments had to be expanded and enlarged, which meant that kibbutzim often had to take out sizable loans to pay for new construction projects, which meant that many kibbutzim found themselves in enormous debt at the worst possible time—right around the major recession and inflation of the 1980s. The financial crisis of the 1980s somehow seemed like a punishment—whether it

was punishment for stepping away from the ancestral communal principles or for holding onto them for too long was a matter of interpretation.

In 2000, a young lawyer named Nachshon Goltz declared that he was preparing a class action lawsuit against the Kibbutz Movement (an organization formed by the merger of the three major kibbutz movements in 1999) on account of "a monstrous experiment in thousands of helpless minors." In an interview that has since been cited and referred to hundreds of times, Goltz, who grew up in kibbutz Ruhama, said that because of the way he was raised, he is incapable of intimacy and incapable of developing healthy relationships and that the only difference between him and other kibbutz children is that he is fully aware of the ways in which his childhood psychologically crippled him for life.[122] Nothing ever became of the lawsuit, but the interview unleashed a torrent of "childhood in the kibbutz" confessions and memoirs that described the children's house as a place of ongoing horror. These narratives featured everything from forced feeding to sexual abuse, from indifference and neglect of caretakers to *Lord of the Flies* powerplays among the children. People began to refer to themselves as "kibbutz survivors." In Israel, where the word "survivor" is only ever coupled with one word—Holocaust—this was quite shocking. Some kibbutz members, especially former educators, tried to defend themselves against these accusations; most kids turned out completely fine, they said, it's just the few overly sensitive or weird ones who had problems (and that's probably because of their parents, not because of the kibbutz). Others said with genuine pain: we didn't realize, we thought we were doing the right thing, it was not a time when you could question the rules. And among themselves they wondered: why beat us up like this for something that is already over, when we are already down?

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In 1977 something that had long seemed impossible happened in Israeli politics: after twenty-nine years in power, the Labor Party (formerly MaPAI) lost the elections to the Likud, a party led by Menahem Begin. The Likud's agenda was right-wing both on the national front and on the economic front, and this was very bad news for the kibbutzim. The national agenda of the new government meant that it prioritized the settlements in the West Bank and allocated tremendous resources to supporting them, resources that in the past were secured for the kibbutzim. The economic agenda of the new government was neoliberal and capitalistic, with pronounced disdain toward socialist organizations and policies, which the right considered both corrupt and ineffective. The kibbutzim were worried, but initially things did not look so bad. Begin surprised everyone when he achieved a historical peace treaty with Egypt and was willing to give up the Sinai Peninsula for this purpose. Despite its official capitalistic line, his government's first major enterprises were actually somewhat socialist in essence, such as building public housing projects. There was room for optimism.

The blow did not come until 1981, when Begin was elected a second time. The 1981 elections were ugly and violent, and the ethnic tensions in Israeli society proved to be fuel on the fire. The Labor Party, which was trying to regain its power, was identified with *Ashkenazim* (Jews of European descent), whereas Begin's Likud was identified with *Mizrahim* (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent). The Labor Party/Ashkenazim were saying (or were presented as saying), "We built this country, it belongs to us—we who are cultured and civilized—and you are latecomers, ignorant and savage, who should just be grateful to us." The Likud/Mizrahim were saying (or were presented as saying), "For thirty years we sat quietly and were humiliated and exploited by you while you were gorging yourselves at our expense. No more!" Begin himself was born and raised in Poland, but his many years in the opposition, when he and his party were put down by the Labor Party and were treated as unwelcome guests in the parliament, made him an "honorary Mizrahi." Begin enthusiastically took on the role of redeemer of lost Mizrahi honor and actively kindled his voters' resentment toward the Ashkenazi institutions and elites that had mistreated them and looked down at them for so many years. One of the main targets toward which Begin directed this resentment was the kibbutzim. In his election speeches, he talked about the kibbutzim not only as nests of communism ("Comm-Nazism," he called it), but also as fattened heifers that live luxuriously at the expense of the taxpayers—and at the expense of the Mizrahi residents of the development towns who had to do the kibbutzim's dirty work for them.

One episode in particular was etched in public memory. In the summer of 1981, shortly after Begin had won the elections, a television crew came to kibbutz Manara to interview its members about the tense relations with the neighboring development town, Kiryat Shemona. For some reason, they decided to conduct the interviews in the kibbutz's swimming pool. One kibbutz member said that the kibbutzim had tried to help the development town in the past, but their efforts were interpreted as condescending and paternalistic, and it's best for both sides to just let each other be. The interview itself did not draw much attention, but when Begin was asked shortly thereafter—on a different matter—about his election strategy of igniting anger and resentment among Mizrahim, he responded, "Did you not see on television that man in the kibbutz sitting in his swimming pool like some American millionaire and talking with a great deal of contempt about the residents of the neighboring development town?"[123] Within one day, the words "millionaires in swimming pools" became a sobriquet for kibbutz members. No longer were they tireless farmers who brought forth bread from the earth with the sweat of their brow, no longer pioneers who risked their lives on the borders for the nation, no longer paragons of a just society, but an overindulged leisure class.

While Begin's targeting of the kibbutzim was demagogic and manipulative, the anger and resentment toward them were very real. The kibbutz movement was, by definition, selective, and therefore, despite its best socialist intentions,

elitist. Since the kibbutz was a totalizing life form that proudly claimed every aspect of its members' existence, kibbutzim often maintained an exclusivist and isolationist mentality, interacting primarily with each other and keeping the non-kibbutz outside. It was inconceivable for kibbutz children, for example, to go to school with non-kibbutz children. The kibbutz's unwelcoming attitude toward outsiders and its members' self-perception as superior to non-members who worked in the kibbutz but could not enjoy its perks registered as downright racist. And while it can hardly be said that kibbutz members lived a luxurious life, both the aesthetics of the kibbutzim (the green lawns, the red tile rooftops, the cleanliness and quiet) and the appearance of unlimited resources for the individual (you could take as much food as you wanted, you didn't need to worry about electric bills or gas bills or a pension) felt, when compared with the conditions in dilapidated and poverty-stricken development towns, like salt on an open wound. In 1982, Amos Oz visited Bet Shemesh, a development town west of Jerusalem, and related the rage and hurt that its residents felt toward the Ashkenazi establishment in general and toward the kibbutzim as its ultimate symbol in particular:

> "Before every election, the kibbutzim show up here [says one of the residents of Bet Shemesh]—Tzora and all the others—to ask for our votes. You go tell your friends: until they let us come to kibbutz Tzora when we want, to swim in their pool and play tennis and go out with their daughters, until they accept the children of Bet Shemesh in their schools, or bring their kids to school here instead of dragging them a hundred kilometers by bus to some white school; until they stop being so snooty, they've got nothing to look for here. We're Begin."
>
> "Look, if a guy like me shows up in your kibbutz, like you showed up in Bet Shemesh today, the secretary runs straight to the telephone to let the police know there's a suspicious character wandering around. Tell me the truth: he'd call, wouldn't he?" [...]
>
> "Take a look at Bet Shemesh and take a look down there at kibbutz Tzora. Their daughters fuck around with the volunteers; their sons smoke dope, steal cars, and come to Bet Shemesh to joy ride at night; they disobey orders during war, spread dirt on the government and the army, marry Swedish girls and leave the country, but so what, they're beautiful. They're the Beautiful Land of Israel, and we're gangsters. Hooligans. Riffraff. The Ugly Land of Israel." [124]

Much of what the residents of Bet Shemesh said to Amos Oz was true. The secretary of the kibbutz probably would have called the police if someone from Bet Shemesh appeared in the kibbutz uninvited. The kibbutzim often treated the development towns as reservoirs of cheap labor and courted them only before the

elections. Kibbutz youths were still considered the cream of the crop even though they were often engaging in very problematic behaviors, as you might expect from kids who spent much of their time without any adult supervision. But the ways that Begin and his supporters thought and talked about the kibbutzim reflected, on a deeper level, that the socialist language ceased to carry weight in Israel of the 1980s to such extent that it became unintelligible. From the perspective of kibbutz members, not only did they *not* have everything, but they in fact had nothing; after all, none of what they had actually belonged to them, and if their children were to leave the kibbutz—which happened more and more frequently—they had absolutely nothing to give them. They didn't think they were alienated from their neighbors but rather that they were committed to a unique and highly demanding way of life that had to be actively cultivated and protected. This ethos and the price that kibbutz members felt they were paying to proudly uphold it no longer resonated among large parts of Israeli society of the 1980s. And Israel was not alone; those were the years of Reagan and Thatcher, the years when the Soviet Bloc was gradually collapsing, the years when capitalism had declared its glorious victory and socialism seemed like a pathetic vestige from a world that no longer existed. The kibbutz as an idea did not make sense anymore.

There was another reason for the kibbutz's fall from public grace. In the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Israeli culture became much more religious than it used to be. The National Camp under the leadership of the Likud was based upon a strong alliance between the religious parties and the political right, and the Six-Day War in 1967 elicited a surge of Jewish messianic sentiments that the staunchly secular Labor party had previously kept in check, which led to a much more positive approach toward religion among Israelis. Especially after the Likud was elected, heavy emphasis was placed on Jewish education and a return to tradition, and active attempts to woo the ultra-Orthodox vote meant increased government investment in Orthodox institutions. For Orthodox Jews, the kibbutzim—which were, at least declaratively, anti-religious—were an anathema, a nightmarish display of Jews who live in blatant defiance of the most elemental Jewish commandments.

Orthodox leaders had been speaking of the kibbutzim with dread and disdain at least since the 1950s, but in the 1980s they started getting much more public attention. Most notably, in March 1990 Rabbi Elazar Shach, a prominent ultra-Orthodox leader, gave a public speech discouraging the religious parties from joining a government headed by the Labor Party. The speech was held in a large stadium in Tel Aviv, attended by over 10,000 people, and broadcast on live television. The kibbutzim, which were historically associated with the Labor Party, served Shach as examples of Jews who are not really Jews: "There are people in the kibbutzim who do not know what Yom Kippur is, do not know what the Sabbath is, do not know what an immersion pool (*mikveh*) is, and they raise bunnies and pigs [both non-kosher animals] [...] If there is no Sabbath and no Yom Kippur, in what sense are they even Jewish?" he said.[125]

I remember watching this speech on television with my mother, and her face reddened with insult and anger. "How dare he!" she yelled, "I'm just as good a Jew as he is!" My mother was never a kibbutz member, but she took these comments very personally. To her, this attack on the kibbutzim was nothing short of sacrilegious. For Shach and a growing number of Israelis, however, it was the kibbutz that was sacrilegious, in a much more conventional sense.

The years 1980–1985 were disastrous for the Israeli economy. A combination of huge military and government expenditures with inconsistent and poorly executed fiscal reforms led to a soaring inflation rate that nearly doubled each year. In 1984, the inflation rate was 400 percent and was projected to reach 1,000 percent by the following year. This crisis was compounded by a collapse of the stocks of the four largest Israeli banks in 1983. These banks, as it turned out, repeatedly bought their own stocks to create the appearance of ongoing demand, but eventually they could no longer afford to maintain the share prices, thus reaching the point of bankruptcy. The government had to bail the banks out, which required a tremendous allocation of monetary resources. The Tel Aviv stock exchange shut down for over two weeks, causing additional significant losses. On the radio, the most-played hit song was an angry rock song called "Waiting for [the] Messiah," which described a group of nervous people in financial ruin waiting for a shrewd businessman by the name of Messiah to bail them out. Messiah fails to show up and eventually kills himself, and the chorus of the song states repeatedly, "Messiah isn't coming, Messiah isn't calling either."[126]

In 1985, the government implemented an emergency economic stabilization plan, which was remarkably successful, and in a fairly short time it put an end to the inflation and set the Israeli economy on a growth trajectory. The recovery of the Israeli economy, however, came hand in hand with a calamity for the kibbutzim.

It was not uncommon for the kibbutzim to be in debt. It was hardly possible to start new agricultural or industrial ventures without taking out sizable loans, and kibbutzim relied heavily on loans and generous credit lines from the major Israeli banks as well as from other national foundations and institutions. Not all these ventures were successful, and kibbutzim were often unable to pay their debt fully or by the appointed time. For as long as the Labor Party was in power, the general understanding was that the government functioned as a cosigner for loans taken out by the kibbutzim and that it would assume responsibility for their debts if needed (and it was often needed). Loan conditions were also usually extremely favorable and forgiving. Moreover, there was an agreement of mutual cosigning among all the kibbutzim in each movement, such that if one kibbutz were to falter, other kibbutzim were obligated to bail it out. Since some of the kibbutzim, especially those with successful large-scale industrial operations, were quite

wealthy, kibbutzim that were not as well off did not feel like they had much to worry about.

In the early 1980s, however, the debt of the kibbutzim grew disproportionally. There were many reasons for this. The transition from children's houses to family homes required massive construction projects; kibbutzim took on adventurous agricultural and industrial projects without looking into them closely enough, which generated major losses; with the first generation of kibbutz members getting older, resources had to be allocated to support care for a newly non-productive sector; the frequent departures of young kibbutz members required more hired laborers to cover the workload; and to top all that off, the kibbutzim were heavily (and amateurishly) invested in the stock market and lost large sums of money in the collapse of 1983. Some kibbutzim also got involved with gray-market loan sharks. By 1985, the debt of the kibbutzim amounted to 2.5 billion shekels (about two billion US dollars in the 1985 exchange rate), with an average of 120 million shekels of debt per kibbutz.

The economic stabilization plan, which entailed far-reaching steps toward liberalization of the market and restriction of government spending, dealt a death blow to the kibbutzim. In order to reduce inflation, interest rates were set at an all-time high to discourage spending. The kibbutzim now had to pay back the many loans they took out during the years of inflation at an interest rate of almost 200 percent. The massive reduction in the government's budget meant that no one was able—or willing—to bail them out this time. The new fiscal policies were not set in any way to support the kibbutzim, and some say that they were purposefully set to hurt them. With every passing year, the debt of the kibbutzim was compounded several times over, and by 1989 it had reached twelve billion shekels. There was no way in the world, not in a thousand years, that the kibbutzim—with dwindling resources and an increasingly aging population, with industries and agricultural operations that were made obsolete by cheap imports as the Israeli market was globalizing, with many members who had no independent earning skills whatsoever—would ever be able to pay this debt. The Messiah, in the form of the state's generous support, wasn't coming, and it wasn't calling either.

Panic was rising. Kibbutz members prepared to have their water and electricity shut off and their furniture and cars and appliances auctioned. The only thing they had that was really valuable was their land. They knew that if worse came to worst, these lands could become the banks' property and be sold to repay the debt. Homelessness seemed like a real possibility. At that point, in an atmosphere of "everyone for themselves," many of the more capable kibbutz members, those who had income-generating professions or work experience that was transferable to other settings, left. Many kibbutzim remained without leadership and without a strong social and administrative core.

To be clear, not all the kibbutzim were affected by the financial crisis. Some of them had very strong economies thanks to successful industrial operations, and

others—like the religious kibbutzim—maintained conservative fiscal policies and never took out significant loans to begin with. But even in kibbutzim that remained solvent and relatively free of existential dread, there was an overwhelming feeling that the kibbutz had no future. Recruiting new members was impossible—why would anyone want to join a ship that was sinking or that could sink at any moment?—and the children who were born and raised in the kibbutz left as soon as they reached adulthood and never came back. To most of them, this way of life was simply not appealing. The history of the kibbutz, which now seemed to be coming to an end, was summarized around that time in one sentence: the first generation asked what they could give, the second generation asked what they could get, and the third generation asked what they could take away.[127] The respective answers to these questions were: everything, something, nothing.

The kibbutzim did not reach the point of bankruptcy. Eventually agreements were reached with the banks through which some of the debt was forgiven, some was paid by the government, some was paid by the Kibbutz Movement using its collective assets and the funds of the wealthy kibbutzim, and the rest was to be paid over a period of time that was determined separately for each kibbutz based on its specific circumstances. Altogether, over twenty-seven billion shekels in debt were dealt with as part of this agreement. The banks made it clear to the kibbutzim that they were going to keep a close eye on them from now on to see how they were managing their finances, how much they were spending, and what income they were actually generating.

There was no question that things would have to change. First and foremost, the kibbutzim would have to learn a completely new language: the language of corporate finance, risk management, hedge funds, capital efficiency, ten-year projections, et cetera. Gone were the days of a kibbutz treasurer with a balance sheet who would write "income" on one side and "expenses" on the other side like they managed a simple family budget. Gone were the days of informally asking for a favor from "Schtacher" or "Madvetzky" in the bank. The kibbutz was now operating in a highly complex and globalized market, and it was in this world that it now had to survive.

The first step on the way to economic recovery was an operative separation of the kibbutz as a community from the kibbutz as a business, the two of which used to be completely entangled. Before the crisis of the 1980s, most kibbutzim subordinated their revenue-generating operations to the general principles of kibbutz governance and ideology, at least to some extent. That meant, for example, that decisions concerning the factory or the plantation (e.g., should new mechanical equipment be purchased, should more workers be hired or fired, etc.) were brought to a vote in the kibbutz assembly and were not necessarily determined based on strictly professional considerations. Kibbutz members were also regularly assigned to work in these operations whether or not they had the necessary skills and experience, which often meant significant waste of time and

resources as people were learning the job or simply slacking off. In the 1990s, it became clear that kibbutzim that were still attached to that model were not going to make it. Kibbutz operations had to become strictly capitalistic ventures unrestricted by socialist principles if they were to become the foundations for the kibbutz's economy.

Degania was one of the kibbutzim that weathered the financial storm quite well, mainly thanks to Toolgal, its highly profitable factory for diamond grinding wheels. In an interview held in 1997, Toolgal's CEO, Shlomo Manoah, said proudly and defiantly that Toolgal's success should be attributed to the abandonment of all socialist principles in its management and to the prioritization of profit above all else:

> Throughout my entire life I supported hired labor. Not out of principle but simply so as to pick the best workers who will generate the highest revenue for the kibbutz. I get up in the morning and I have only one goal from morning till evening: how to generate the greatest income for Degania. So, yes—money, money, absolutely money, that dirty word, money. [...] When I come here in the morning, I'm a capitalist. All day long I am one hundred percent capitalist. In the evening, when I cross the road back to Degania, I become a socialist. I have a few hours each night when I am a socialist. There's no democracy here: the management consists of professionals. There's no member who works in the banana plantation here, no representative of the knitting old ladies, and no whoever is shouting the loudest in the members' assembly. [...] I don't see any social side to this. Finances have no social side.[128]

In the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, the connection between the business operations of each kibbutz and the kibbutz itself became increasingly nominal. Kibbutz businesses such as a dairy farm or a plastic factory or cotton plantations came to rely heavily on external investments and professional management, and for the most part they turned into corporations that operated independently with little to no input from kibbutz members. Kibbutz members now functioned as shareholders in the kibbutz's business in the sense that when the factory or farm turned a profit, they received some dividends from that profit. The revenue from the kibbutz's business, however, now went primarily to grow and sustain the business itself—not to pay for members' home renovations or for university tuition. The money for those would have to come from somewhere else.

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The notion that agricultural and industrial operations in the kibbutzim are best managed and handled by professionals eventually led to the realization that the kibbutz's expenses on every front—housing, food, education, health, transportation, recreation, et cetera—must also be managed professionally. The

treasurer was thus replaced with a "fiscal manager," a specialized position that required training, knowledge, and experience. Some kibbutzim found a member who was especially suitable for the position, whereas others had to bring in an outside person to manage their finances for them. This was the first step in kibbutz administration becoming a profession rather than a rotating leadership role that members, out of a sense of duty, periodically agreed to take on.

When the newly appointed fiscal managers began to look into the spending patterns of their own or other kibbutzim more closely, they discovered a grim reality. To put it very simply, most people were not earning their keep, and moreover, most people had no idea that they were not earning their keep. The kibbutz was providing its members with a quality of life that was completely incommensurate with most members' actual contribution to the kibbutz's economy, while members kept no tabs on how much of the kibbutz's resources they were consuming. Israel Oz, who spearheaded the negotiations for the debt agreement with the kibbutzim and who later served as consultant for several kibbutzim in their restructuring process, described it in no uncertain terms: *people took no responsibility for their own existence*. Kibbutz members lived in a bubble, without the faintest clue as to what things like gas or electricity actually cost, and with no sense whatsoever of things like credit, interest rates, savings accounts, or overdraft. Moreover, they carried on like none of this pertained to them. "I met an entire class of parasites with the few carrying the many on their backs. There was an abundance of maintenance, services, and childcare jobs that could not sustain themselves [...] which allowed for a great deal of inefficiency," he said.[129]

To some extent, this inefficiency was the result of the sacred work ethos of the kibbutz, which determined that every member had to work and that all work is of equal value. The emphasis was on *work* as an activity, not on *earning* as a result. Kibbutz members who did not work in agriculture or industry and who did not have professional training that allowed them to work outside the kibbutz had to find something to do in the kibbutz. This was easy enough when clothes and dishes had to be washed by hand, but how many service workers does one need when everything is mechanized and mass-produced? The kibbutz's laundry room, for example, would have eight or ten workers each day whose job was to put clothes in the washers, move them to the dryers, fold them, and place them in the members' assigned compartments. This non-income-generating work could easily be done by two people. In addition, the kibbutz was committed to supporting all its members throughout their entire lives, which meant that even members who did not work at all—not only those who were ill or old but even those who were fully invested in a hobby or were simply lazy—still enjoyed all the benefits of being a kibbutz member—exactly the same benefits as those who worked tirelessly in the fields all day or those who made a sizeable income outside the kibbutz and gave it all to the common funds.

But whereas inefficiency and hidden unemployment were essentially structural issues and the distribution of tasks an expression of compassion toward members of varying abilities and inclinations, what fiscal managers discovered about the ways that members abused the kibbutz's resources revealed an ugly truth about human nature. What people get freely, they tend to take for granted and to waste carelessly. Oded Ambar of Ein Zivan, the first kibbutz to be fully privatized in 1992, described what things were like in his kibbutz prior to the change:

> If you had looked at the trash cans of the dining hall, you would have seen enormous quantities of fresh food that were thrown away. The shared vehicles were always dirty and derelict with many safety issues. I remember a case when a young kibbutz member was driving up to Ein Zivan when the car's engine exploded. They asked him, "Did you not notice that the red light was on?" He said he didn't notice. I assure you, had it been his own car he would have noticed. [...] If two couples [who were going to the same place on the same day] had to share a vehicle, there would always be problems: "Why should we drive together? We don't like the other couple." But once gas started costing money, everyone started riding together to split the costs. [...] Every kibbutz member had a telephone, and before privatization the custom was that if a family member called, we'd hang up and call them back [since the kibbutz was paying the phone bill anyway].[130]

Uzi Zur, the fiscal manager of kibbutz Shamir, offered an anecdote that encapsulates the depth of the depravity as he saw it:

> As was my habit, I went to pick up lunch in the dining hall, and I saw someone next to me taking a large portion of meat—I think it was a handsome serving of chicken—and putting it in a dish that was clearly meant for dogs. And when I told him, "Say, don't you think you're crossing a line here?" he said to me, "Why, do you think my dog deserves any less than you do?" When I heard that response, that was the moment, I think, that I realized that it is impossible for the kibbutz to continue to exist as it was. Moreover, it is *immoral* to let it continue to exist as it was.[131]

What Zur, who was a kibbutz member his entire life, saw when he started scrutinizing the economic behavior of his fellows convinced him of the essence of the liberal critique of socialism: that by trying desperately to eliminate inequality among people so as to achieve social justice, one was creating intolerable social *in*justice. Moreover, he became convinced that the kibbutz's original communal model did not fail just because of unfavorable circumstances but was rather always doomed to fail: "Maintaining a truly communal, truly egalitarian kibbutz," he said, "is only possible with people who, in my view, do not exist. There are no such

human creatures." If at all, communalism could only be maintained in conditions of wretched poverty, as the case was in the earliest years of the kibbutzim, but it is inherently incompatible with a life that anyone would actually want to live now.[132]

It was not only fiscal managers, who scrutinized the kibbutzim primarily through an economic lens, who came to the conclusion that the noble ideas of equality and communalism actually enabled freeloading, wastefulness, idleness, selfishness, and recklessness. Even the idealistic founders of the kibbutz began to admit that perhaps the idea that human nature could be so thoroughly transformed as to create people whose consciousness is truly and exclusively collective was misguided from the start. Avraham Balaban describes a visit to the kibbutz he grew up in, Hulda, in 1997, during which the kibbutz appeared as a shadow of its former self: mostly abandoned, dilapidated, alarmingly quiet. During that visit, one of the older members of Hulda offered a powerful reflection on what he now saw as his and his fellow founders' naivety and shortsightedness:

> There's one thing we didn't take into account. [...] We were together all the time, of course, and were well aware of the shortcomings of each and every member. We knew that Motele didn't put all the money he brought with him in the kibbutz's account but set some aside, and we knew that Baruch is not a very hard worker and that if you wouldn't watch him he'd stop working, and we knew that Sarka is a busybody who is constantly looking for flaws in everyone, and that this man was this way and that woman was that way. But we thought they were like that because of the houses they grew up in and that it would be possible to explain and discuss and repair. We did not take into account that it was not Motele and Baruch and Sarka who were the problem but rather human nature.
>
> We were naïve and idealistic [...] We thought we were simply dealing with Motele."[133]

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And so, in the 1990s, slowly but steadily, the transformation began. Kibbutzim with especially dire debt situations were the first to institute privatization processes. They were initially chastised as traitors and even as heretics, but soon many other kibbutzim followed suit. The first step in the process, as mentioned, was privatization of services, namely, determining that members were now individually responsible for *all* their expenses—including their basic subsistence. Things that were once given freely were now actively taken from the member's budget. No more all-you-can-eat in the dining hall, for example, but a cafeteria-style setting where everything from the fish sticks to the cup of coffee is priced, and there's a cash register where each member pays for the items on their tray. In many kibbutzim the communal dining hall started operating only part of the time

or closed altogether. People started paying their own electric, gas, and phone bills. They also had to pay for groceries and toiletries, which in the past they simply picked up at the local supply store. For many, this change in and of itself required acquiring new skills and developing financial literacy and sensibility that most people develop in their early twenties. As one kibbutz member lamented in 1994:

> All those privatizations—what do I know about this? I don't know and I'm not looking into it. All of a sudden they charge you for electricity—never in my life did I worry about such things. And all those considerations of where to buy fruits and vegetables, starting to calculate by the kilo, it all used to be free! [...] I was happy in the old kibbutz. I was meant for a kibbutz, it's perfect for me. I like not having to think. I like it when someone else buys for me, cooks for me, prepares for me, all of that. I don't like dealing with money. It stresses me out—this belongs to city life. [...] I find it very scary.[134]

The next phase of the change, the differentiation of salaries, was even more complicated and terrifying. The privatization process meant that kibbutz members were now required not simply to work but to *make money*. If one worked in kibbutz operations that were profitable, one was paid by the hour; whoever worked more made more money. The manager and the menial laborer were not paid the same. Specialization mattered, experience mattered, type of labor mattered. Work was assessed by its market value, not by its commensurability with the ethos of work for its own sake. To put it very simply, the kibbutz was no longer a classless society: some had more, and some had less.

Even kibbutz members who were willing to accept the change as inevitable could not help but see it as the end of the kibbutz. The leaders of the privatization process tried to brand it with names like "the new kibbutz," "the future kibbutz," "kibbutz +," et cetera, and they tried to create a hype of optimism and enthusiasm: "It's still a kibbutz, only better!" But on the brink of the 2000s, at a time when spirits in the kibbutzim were at an all-time low, people didn't really buy it. They wished that everyone would just admit that the dream was over, that the kibbutz is gone, that whoever still lives in the so-called-kibbutz-which-is-not-really-a-kibbutz-anymore would sooner or later die and that no one would take their place. In twenty years, people said, this will be a shopping mall or an overpriced suburb. Nothing will remain of us.

8

A Signal Non-Failure

2000–2023

In September 2000, Be'eri Zimmerman, a poet and teacher from kibbutz Giv'at Hayim, published a piece in which he compared the refusal to accept the demise of the kibbutz to a refusal to unplug a patient who is already dead from life support. He called it "A Time for Eulogy":

> Very slowly yet very quickly it turns out that the doctors who stand around the kibbutz's bed must take one last look at that which lies in front of them, cover it with a sheet, and go out into the corridor to the family members to give them the word. [...]
>
> On the bed lies what used to be a living kibbutz and now it is—yes, what can you do, that is the way of the world—dead. Movement used to be its essence, but now it is lying lifeless like a stone in the field. Not its bare feet weighed it down, not its empty hands, not its blind eyes. It is the heart that died within it. [...]
>
> This is the time when the fools and the hypocrites are waiting for a miracle, but the lovers and the faithful ones do not tarry. They go out into the corridor, hug, cry, and jump into the abyss.[135]

Zimmerman's call to acknowledge the death of the kibbutz, to grieve, and to "jump into the abyss," resonated widely among the kibbutzim in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, what lay ahead really did seem like a dark and ominous abyss. Middle-aged people whose occupation for decades was "kibbutz member" now had to find new ways of making a living, often without any education or professional training. Elderly people who had no retirement savings, who were already battling deteriorating health and other woes of old age, were genuinely terrified of impoverishment unto death. In many kibbutzim that were

badly stricken by the economic crisis of the 1980s, preexisting social tensions and factions rose to the surface and led to open hostilities and communal dysfunction, such that it wasn't even possible to hold a productive kibbutz conversation anymore. And even in kibbutzim that weathered the financial crisis relatively intact, there were insurmountable conflicts between members who wanted to adhere to the old communal model and members who pushed for privatization with the assumption that the collapse that was averted once would come around again before long if things didn't change.

Beyond the existential abyss that kibbutz members were faced with as individuals and as members of a community, there lurked an ideological and conceptual abyss: if a kibbutz is no longer a communal life form in the traditional sense, *what is it*? A co-op? A homeowner's association? A living museum? A miniature version of a welfare state? Is there a way to keep some principles of communality and not others? Is there a way to change but remain the same?

Over two decades later, it appears that Be'eri Zimmerman's eulogy was premature. The kibbutz has not died. As a matter of fact, the population of the kibbutzim actually increased—from about 115,000 in 2000 to about 145,000 in 2020 (not counting people who live in kibbutzim as renters, who number about 25,000). This is in large part due to the "expansion neighborhoods" that were built in many kibbutzim, which allow people to live in a kibbutz as residents and enjoy some of its amenities for a fee without committing to the community's governing principles—principles that vary widely from one kibbutz to the next. Regardless of whether a particular kibbutz held on to a firm communal ideology, privatized some but not all of its aspects, or maintained only a framework of loose financial and social solidarity, kibbutz leaders take pride in the fact that in a world economy that is becoming increasingly brutal, and in a society that is becoming increasingly stratified, kibbutzim in the third decade of the twenty-first century generally manage to maintain a true social democracy. Each individual enjoys full autonomy and is able to pursue their talents, to live up to their potential, and to make independent choices, but the community also maintains a strong alliance among its members and does not let people fall into destitution. In most kibbutzim there are palpable economic differences between members—immediately visible in the landscape, which now features multi-story villas alongside modest two-bedroom apartments—but no one is very rich and no one is very poor. It's not quite the dream of Degania's founders in the wooden shack on the Jordan River in 1910, but for 2023, it's still impressive.

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In the early 2000s, the kibbutz movement seemed to have been going through yet another split, which brought back echoes of the traumatic split of the 1950s. On one side were kibbutzim that pushed for ever-increasing privatization processes and moved away from the communal model with emphasis on two major

transformations, namely, differentiation of salaries and private ownership of residences. On the other side were kibbutzim that persisted in their desire to remain "real" kibbutzim, based on fundamental principles of equality and sharing of all major assets (such as houses, cars, and industrial operations). The former called themselves, "Kibbutz Future" (*kibbutz atid*) and the latter, defiantly, called themselves "Kibbutz Always" (*kibbutz tamid*). Needless to say, the conflict was not only between one kibbutz and the next but often between proponents and opponents of privatization within the very same kibbutz. These tensions and conflicts further frayed the social fabric of the kibbutz, which was often already quite worn out. At that point, many kibbutzim turned to organizational consultants and professional community managers to provide leadership in what felt like an impossible situation. This, too, was a dramatic shift, as autonomous self-management was a sacred principle of the kibbutz ever since the workers in Kinneret Farm went on strike in 1909.

The appeal to external community management on top of external fiscal management was a painful step, although many would say in retrospect that it was a necessary one at the time. Kibbutz members, especially of the older generation, felt like they were told, "You messed this up so badly, you can't be trusted to run your own lives anymore," and they felt like the incredible accomplishments of the past were completely forgotten. Those people made the desert bloom; they planted trees and built houses on stony, isolated mountains without access to water; they survived brutal wars and attacks and rose time and again from the ashes; they made so much out of nothing. Now they were considered so incompetent that they had to pay some kid fresh out of an MBA who never worked a day of physical labor in their life to solve the kibbutz's problems. Kibbutz members who were opposed to privatization and wanted to maintain the "old" kibbutz also felt, probably justifiably, that those external managers were aggressively pushing them to make changes they did not want to make, using subtle and not-so-subtle threats that obsolete socialist principles would bring about their end. Those who pushed for the change repeated the words "responsibility" and "freedom" ad nauseam, whereas those who opposed it said plainly: there is a kibbutz, and there is a non-kibbutz; the rest is just semantics.

Reading about the conversations that organizational consultants and managers had with kibbutz members during those years, I was struck by the extent to which those consultants were trying to train kibbutz members to think differently about *themselves*—not only as economic actors and as consumers but as individuals and as family members. In a sense, this was a new iteration of the systematic attempt to uproot existing notions of ownership and property and to redefine the individual's relations with the community, which marked the beginnings of the kibbutz movement—but in the reverse direction. Instead of instilling in people the idea that what's mine is yours and what's yours in mine, they were now trying to instill the idea that what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours. Instead of convincing people not to treat their work as a commodity, they

were now convincing them that the only viable way to consider their work was as a commodity. And instead of urging people to surrender their own desires and ambitions to the will of the collective, they were now urging people to cultivate and prioritize their desires and ambitions. These attempts at capitalistic re-education were met with the same resistance in the beginning of the twenty-first century as their socialist counterparts were met with in the beginning of the twentieth century.

One particularly illustrative example is a discussion regarding the use of vehicles, which took place around 2008 in a kibbutz going through a transition from communal to semi-communal living. In the old model, each member who needed to drive somewhere would put their name down and receive whichever car was available from the kibbutz's fleet. The kibbutz subsidized the use of cars for all its members as well as their gas expenses (up to a point). As part of the kibbutz's restructuring process, the organizational consultant advised a pay-per-use model: people would have to use their own funds to make use of the kibbutz's cars in the same way one would pay to rent a car from a rental company. One of the older members of the kibbutz was very much opposed; different members, he said, have different needs. Some need to use cars often and some seldom. Why should the former be punished with hefty payments just because their needs happen to be greater? The organizational consultant responded that if this is the case, those who frequently use cars would do well to use their personal funds to buy a car of their own. "I know you don't like to hear this, but mobility is an essential need for people in the twenty-first century. Outside the kibbutz there's barely a single family that does not have a car," she said. Another member got angry. "You make it sound like I don't have a car. I do have a car!" he said, meaning that the kibbutz's car is *his* even if he doesn't own it, since like any other person he can use a car whenever he needs to. At that point, the organizational consultant was frustrated. "The era we live in is not about what you need," she said, "it's about what you want."[136]

Much more painful and raw were the conversations regarding the transition toward personal financial responsibility, that is, toward a model in which each member's livelihood depends directly on their own income. As many or most of the non-profitable kibbutz operations—dining hall, childcare, laundry, clothing alterations and repairs, among others—either shut down or migrated to a market-value based model (for example, now a daycare provider in a kibbutz made as much as a daycare provider in the city, not as much as a the manager of the kibbutz's factory), people who worked in these operations had to find new ways to generate income. Essentially, they had to start over at the age of forty or fifty or even sixty. Those most impacted by this change were women, who had traditionally been steered toward service jobs in the kibbutzim and were often prevented from seeking further education or professionalization opportunities. Israel Oz describes a difficult conversation with a kibbutz member in her fifties who was told that she must find a way to support herself because her workplace

in the kibbutz was about to close down: "She started sobbing and said to me, 'What am I going to do now? How will I find a job? When I wanted to take on a leadership role, they didn't let me, they never gave me the foundation.' She was absolutely miserable because she was certain that the kibbutz was a safety net for life. She went with the comforts of the kibbutz, with the inferior jobs. To take on more meaningful and more profitable jobs she would have had to fight the system [...] but not everyone had the strength to fight."[137]

But from the edge of despair, many kibbutz members did manage to find new beginnings. If you visit kibbutzim today, you'll see signs at the entrance announcing a plethora of small businesses, mostly owned by women; they sell pastries or quilts, offer hairstyling and facials, guided tours, piano or drawing lessons, and so on. Some of them continue to work in childcare, eldercare, or housekeeping jobs, now living much more frugally than they did before the change, but they nonetheless know that for as long as they live, their basic needs in terms of housing, sustenance, and healthcare will always be provided by the kibbutz. That is something that even the kibbutzim that went through the most radical processes of privatization agreed upon: the kibbutz would not abandon its members altogether. The elder members would have pensions, and those who could not sustain themselves independently, either temporarily or permanently, would be sustained by the collective through a progressive taxation system. And while different members would have different standards of living, once a member's standard of living plummeted below a certain minimum, the collective would help them get back to that minimum.

Another dramatic shift, which did not take place until the early 2000s and is still unfolding in many kibbutzim to this day, was listing kibbutz members' apartments as their own property. This means, in effect, that kibbutz members have assets under their names that they can sell or leave to their heirs if they so desire. This process is immensely complicated for a variety of legal reasons, among other things because kibbutz real estate, unlike most commercial and residential real estate in the world, is not parcellated; no one knows exactly where one person's land begins and the other's ends because it was never designed to be divided into separate plots. This is the last and most decisive stage in the privatization of the kibbutzim—the one most inimical to the core of kibbutz ideology, in a sense—and some kibbutzim that are otherwise mostly privatized are still resisting it.

Today, kibbutzim are generally divided into two "streams": the "new stream," under which falls the majority of the kibbutzim, have instituted differential salaries and other measures of privatization, and the "communal stream," which holds on to firmer principles of equal distribution of wealth and shared ownership. The latter stream is significantly smaller than the former (less than a quarter of the kibbutzim are officially "communal"), but interestingly, the kibbutzim under its banner are among the wealthiest in the country. This fact could be symbolically read as encapsulating the entire history of socialism insofar as it demonstrates

that an ideology that was meant to overcome extreme poverty in the beginning of the twentieth century can only be sustained through measurable affluence in the twenty-first century. Yet those who proudly belong to the communal stream take great offence when one tells them that they are able to maintain equality and shared ownership only because they have so much surplus income. Quite the contrary, they say: we have so much surplus income *because* we maintain equality and shared ownership. We succeeded because of socialism, not despite it.

Within the two streams, the "new" and the "communal," there is a great deal of variety, and in stark contrast to the days when kibbutzim of the same ideological movement were expected to present political and organizational uniformity, almost no two kibbutzim are exactly the same in terms of their social and economic model. However, there are two fundamental conditions that a residential community must meet in order to be officially recognized as a kibbutz. The first is a principle of mutual reliance, according to which the community is collectively responsible for providing its members' basic needs in terms of healthcare, education, minimum wages, housing, and so forth, through established mechanisms of redistribution of wealth. How much of their income members are able to keep, how much is allocated to the community, and what needs (or wants) are provided for by the kibbutz as opposed to by the members themselves is up to each and every community's discretion. The second principle is democratic governance, in which decisions pertaining to the community as a whole must be put to a vote and supported by a majority of the members, and decisions pertaining to fundamental aspects of "kibbutzism"—that is, the socioeconomic organization of the community—must receive three-quarters of the votes.[138]

These are prosaic and pragmatic ideas, spoken in the mundane language of reality and not in the poetry of world-transforming and self-transforming ideals. The plans for their implementation took shape and were refined through tedious conversations with accountants, insurance agents, retirement specialists, and communal social workers, not through the fiery furnace of revolutionary zeal. But while for some these core principles represent a lamentable thinning down, if not utter abandonment, of the kibbutz's essence, others revel in the fact that kibbutzim were able to adapt to circumstances that are so radically different from the ones in which they were established and that they still actively strive for a better and more just kind of society. As one member of Degania compellingly put it, the "Book of the Change"—that is, the very dry, multipage document outlining Degania's restructuring and reorganization process, which was ratified by the members' assembly in 2006—perhaps tells you more about the resilience and accomplishments of this community throughout its existence than anything else:

> You ask what one might show a visitor so that they would understand what Degania is. I would show visitors Degania of the present day. Not the "Pioneers Court" [the initial dwelling place of Degania's founders], which is

the history, and not the Jordan River, which is the place, and not the trees or the houses. I'd show them the "Book of the Change."[139]

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The last time I visited Degania was in July of 2013. My husband, who is American, came with me, and I was excited, almost giddy, to show the place to him. We arrived right around lunch time, a sweltering early afternoon hour, but for the first time since my childhood the visit did not commence in the communal dining hall. By that point the dining hall was no longer in operation on regular weekdays, only on special occasions. Instead, we went to Havah and Odi's house where an incredible feast awaited us, laid out on a large dining table that I did not remember that they had. The food that Havah made was delicious, better than anything that was ever served in the dining hall, but I missed the vegetable soup and boiled potatoes that were cooked in enormous cauldrons for hundreds of people. Degania's dining hall, with a spectacular view overlooking the Jordan Valley and the Golan Heights in the distance, was never just a cafeteria for me. I think I always entered it a little like one enters a church—with a sense of awe and admiration, feeling like here was a passage into a different world—and a superior world at that. Passing by the dining hall's closed doors, I felt a genuine sense of loss.

Odi and Havah were by then in their seventies, effectively retired. They played leading roles in Degania's transformation process, which was not easy and involved a great deal of consternation, pain, and enmity. But the change brought something else with it, perhaps unexpectedly: two of their four children came back to Degania with their own children. Like most kibbutz members, Havah and Odi were resigned to the fact that their children and grandchildren would live far away from them and that they would only see them occasionally. Indeed, not one of their four children, all of whom pursued academic studies or professional careers, was interested in kibbutz life in its traditional format. But when they realized that they could pursue their careers and lead autonomous lives within the kibbutz, and that their children could benefit from the open spaces and freedom and the beautiful nature (and from proximity to their grandparents) without being subject to the rules and whims of some kibbutz education committee, their oldest daughter and their youngest son both came back home.

They were not the only ones. Children of kibbutz members who left their home kibbutz as soon as they were able in the 1980s and 1990s now started coming back, renting vacant apartments or building new houses in the expansion neighborhoods that kibbutzim had been developing rapidly on former agrarian lands that were no longer in use. Kibbutzim that had to abandon the dream of economic prosperity deriving strictly from agriculture or industry quickly realized that they had two major assets at their disposal. First, they had land, which was usually significantly cheaper in rural areas than it is in densely populated areas; and second, they had capital in the form of the public perception of kibbutzim as

verdant, lush, and peaceful places with a high quality of life. Put together, these two assets allowed the kibbutzim to market themselves as uniquely attractive places for young families and to generate significant profits from real estate sales and community taxes. This is not to say that everyone swarmed to live in the kibbutzim once they shed most of their communal principles, but individuals who always had a penchant for community life, or those who never quite felt comfortable in the city and yearned for the valleys and the mountains and the fields, found the kibbutz in its new form to be a compelling option. Many kibbutzim today have waitlists of people seeking to join them, and this includes the kibbutzim in the most precarious areas in the country, near the border with Lebanon in the north and near Gaza in the south.

Living in a kibbutz today does not necessarily mean being a *member* of the kibbutz such that one participates in its socioeconomic safety net both as a contributor and as a potential beneficiary. Different kibbutzim have different models of belonging, often with various tiers of privileges and responsibilities. At this time, there are approximately 170,000 people living in about 250 kibbutzim, but only 60,000 or so of them are officially considered kibbutz members whereas the rest are renters, temporary residents, permanent non-member residents, or candidates for membership. It is not always simple to navigate those multiple tiers, and tensions and complaints about unfairness (from all sides involved) are prevalent in almost every kibbutz, but there is a consensus that opening the kibbutzim to multiple models of residency and community involvement—while still applying, to be sure, mechanisms of selection and scrutiny—has brought many kibbutzim back to life when they were thought to be taking their last breaths. As Nir Meir, the current secretary of the Kibbutz Movement, declared triumphantly in 2018: "The state of the kibbutzim has never been better. More members, more children, and *much* more money."[140] Even the volunteers have returned, now coming mostly from China, South Korea, and Central America rather than from Western Europe—and they are treating it as an exciting, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

What has become, then, of the socialist dream of an equality-based, justice-driven, world-repairing society, in which individuals are unencumbered by pursuit of property and wealth and dedicate all their mental and physical resources to building something greater than themselves, while also nourishing and transforming their own souls? There are, of course, still people in Israel who uphold such a dream. As was the case one hundred and twenty years ago, they are mostly young people, in their early twenties, and now, as then, they experiment with modes of communal living and call themselves a "kibbutz." The new kibbutzim, however, are not established in rural areas but rather in the midst of Israel's cities—primarily in so-called development towns and underserved inner-city neighborhoods. Their members work in the communities among which they live, taking on projects in education, sustainability, welfare, public health, housing, and so on. Those enterprises, which are based on the notion that the call of the

hour is not to grow potatoes and onions but to eradicate socioeconomic inequity, are known as urban kibbutzim. There are about ten established urban kibbutzim in Israel as well as several dozen short-term urban kibbutzim, where young idealists in their late teens and early twenties live for a year or two as a form of national service. Several of these urban kibbutzim are officially defined as "educators' kibbutzim" the declared goal of which is to foster K-12 educational enterprises and to develop settings for informal education, such as youth movements and after-school programs.

The urban kibbutzim, few and small in scale as they are, illustrate one fundamental aspect of the kibbutz as a historical phenomenon: this social structure and mode of organization is best suited for a group of people that sets out to accomplish an urgent task in the face of great challenges. The pursuits of social, economic, and environmental justice in the present, like the Zionist pursuits of settlement and defense in the past, lend themselves to cohesive groups of like-minded individuals in which the shared purpose and proud identity of a self-selecting elite make up for the difficulties, and intense peer pressure discourages slacking, despair, or abandoning the goal. The urban kibbutzim, however, while generally much more fiercely committed to communalism, consensus building, and rejection of private property than most traditional kibbutzim are today, have carefully avoided replicating what could be called the "mistakes of the past." Children in urban kibbutzim live in their parents' homes and their parents have complete control over their upbringing. Maintaining the privacy and the intimacy of the individual and the family is seen as a necessary condition for, rather than an as impediment to, healthy community life, and allowing each member maximum freedom to pursue a range of relationships, commitments, and interests is a priority. While all income is communally distributed, each member is at liberty to do as they see fit with the funds that are distributed to them. These principles, which were operative de facto in most kibbutzim by the late 1970s but were often regarded as concessions or deviations from the desired ideal, are the fundamentals upon which new and highly idealistic kibbutzim are built today.

Perhaps the most intriguing and most inspiring example of the kibbutz's ability to shapeshift and serve as fertile ground for a variety of social experiments is kibbutz Kishor in the western Galilee. This kibbutz was established in 1976 and has struggled financially and socially for a number of years. By the mid-1990s, most of its members had left, and some of the lands were auctioned for sale in order to pay its debt. In 1997 the lands were acquired, with the support of the state, by a non-profit organization that sought to create a new and revolutionary model of care for people with special needs. The organization founders' idea was to apply the quintessential principles and lifestyle of the kibbutz—an all-encompassing living environment in which life is built around productive manual labor and in which one is exempt from concerns of livelihood—to a community of individuals who are mentally, intellectually, or emotionally challenged. The kibbutz model, the founders brilliantly realized, enables people with special needs

to live mostly independently and enjoy freedom and flexibility that they would never have in a more institutional setting, but it also overcomes the problem of loneliness, which is often the lot of differently-abled people when they lead a "normal" life in the city. Since 2005, kibbutz Kishor consists of two separate but intertwined components: Kishorit, a village designated specifically for people with special needs where they are supported by a professional staff, and Kishor, the kibbutz in whose various operations—a vineyard, a bakery, a factory for recycled plastic, a chicken coop, and others—the village's residents and the kibbutz members work. The members of kibbutz Kishor are people who closely associate themselves with the village's mission—whether as professionals (social workers, doctors, therapists, etc.), as family members of the residents, or simply as individuals who wish to be part of this meaningful project.

Kishor/Kishorit is a powerful demonstration of the ways that the foundational ideals upon which the kibbutz movement was built can still be relevant, even if in a very different way than the ancestors of this movement envisioned a century ago. Nowhere does the principle of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" make more sense than in a neurodiverse environment where some people have greater needs and lesser abilities, and some people have greater abilities and lesser needs, but they are all treated with compassion and care. Indeed, this stands in stark contrast to the "old" kibbutz where the unspoken expectation was that everyone will have the same abilities and the same needs. The prioritization of working over earning, such that productive work is seen as a value in and of itself and not primarily as a way to generate revenue (although it does generate some revenue), makes more sense in a community of people with special needs then it does anywhere else. And the notion that a communal setting can protect the individual not only from daily strife but also from isolation and despair, a notion that stood at the heart of the very first Jewish communes that formed in Palestine in the first decade of the twentieth century, is manifest in all its force in this unique place.

Of course, Kishor/Kishorit never was—and never intended to be—a self-sufficient and self-reliant operation as the first kibbutzim struggled so hard to be. It is supported heavily by the state as well as by donations from a variety of private organizations and individuals, and decisions regarding the village's residents are not necessarily made through democratic voting in the members' assembly. You could very well say that it is not *really* a kibbutz but more of a therapeutic facility in the garb of a kibbutz. That may be so, but the garb is not insignificant. In Israel, even after all these years, the word "kibbutz" connotes something noble, respectable, salt-of-the-earth. To invite individuals who are usually relegated to the margins of society to proudly identify as kibbutz members is a culturally meaningful act, and it is also a way of suggesting, somewhat subversively, that while the actors have changed, the play called "The Kibbutz" has not yet ended.

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When I first set out to write this book and wondered how I was to tell the story of the kibbutz, the plot structure that appealed to me the most was that of a Greek tragedy, a dramatic narrative that commences with good intentions and ends in defeat and demise. It seemed to work perfectly: in the beginning there was hubris in the form of the idea that human nature could be completely remolded, that all forms of attachment—to things and to people—could be severed, and that the right way of life would breed the right kind of people. The hubris led to shameful acts: separating children from parents, denying people privacy and autonomy, tearing friendships and families apart in the name of ideological zeal, regulating every aspect of people's lives, and putting them under endless scrutiny. Then came the punishment: public fall from favor, massive departures, financial collapse, and life in ideological, even if not physical, exile. And what we're left with at the end is a catharsis in the spirit of classical liberalism, with the affirmation that the world works best when individuals seek to increase their own well-being and prosperity rather than venture all kinds of social and economic experiments that go against this simple and self-evident principle.

But the story of the kibbutz is, at the end of the day, not really a tragedy. It featured a lot of individual tragedies along the road—people who could not handle the demanding lifestyle and ended up taking their own lives, women whose desires and ambitions were trampled over and over again, children who grew up with little parental care and with no escape from incessant social pressure and abuse—but the story of the kibbutz as a *movement* is not a tragic one (and, to be fair, many of these tragedies are lived by those in "normal" communities as well). The kibbutz, as I mentioned, has not died, and its people have not found themselves hopeless and destitute, despite a very real fear that that would be the case. The kibbutz simply *changed*, but it has been changing from the moment it was created until this very moment. You could ask, as in the famous parable of the Ship of Theseus, when does something change so thoroughly that it ceases to be identical with itself. But change is the ultimate sign that something is still alive. As historian Muki Tsur wisely noted, if Yosef Bussel, the charismatic leader of Degania's founders, were to visit Degania today, he probably wouldn't recognize anything as familiar—except for the frequent shaking of heads and saying, "The kibbutz isn't what it used to be." That, Bussel would confirm, was said already back in 1912.[141]

Once one chooses to tell the story of the kibbutz as one of ongoing and vibrant change rather than as a story of demise and fall, it becomes evident that this change can be narrated on three different levels—or if you will, through three concentric circles: the global, as part of world history; the national, as part of the history of Israel; and the local, as a history of a place and of a community tied to that place. The interplay between those three levels was there from the start. On the one hand, the kibbutz proudly thought of itself as a tiny bubble, a cultural and social enclave in a miniscule country, on which the external world was to have no impact; everything that was non-kibbutz could and should remain outside the fence, posing neither threat nor temptation. On the other hand, the kibbutz

wanted to lead the way—not just for the Jews and not just for Israel but for the entire world—and to a great extent perceived itself as the center, as the place in which the most important and urgent things in the world were happening. Gradually, the kibbutz accepted both the fact that it is not the center of the world—in fact it is a very negligible phenomenon—and that it is both in and of the world and in and of its times.

From a global perspective, the kibbutz is essentially a petri dish in which the large-scale processes and vicissitudes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be observed on a microscopic level. It was created through the revolutionary zeal of the 1910s the 1920s; it was fiercely nationalistic and ravaged by war in the 1930s and 1940s; it was divided by the Cold War in the 1950s; it embraced individualism and self-expression in the 1960s and 1970s; it collapsed with the Soviet Bloc in the 1980s; and it found a complicated and somewhat unstable way to exist in the fast-paced global market of the 1990s and 2000s. In the twenty-first century it embraced neoliberal ideals of individual prosperity, but it is also the go-to place for people with heightened concerns for social justice and sustainability.

On a national level, the story of the kibbutz is in many ways the story of Zionism—which is to say, of the movement born of the idea that Jews should live as a sovereign people in their mythical homeland—for all its complexity and internal contradictions, its triumphs and its losses, its heroism and its wrongdoings. Its roots are in an innocent and idealistic desire to be liberated from the perpetual humiliation of being a despised minority in someone else's country, to rejuvenate physically and mentally, and to be attached to the land of one's dreams. It was embroiled in the imperial conundrums of the early twentieth century that led to Mandatory British rule and to animosity and hostility between Jews and Arabs, both falling victim to imperial maneuvers and also taking advantage of them. It was headstrong in its determination to acquire more and more lands, not really thinking of the people whose lands were taken. Its war for survival in 1947–1949 was one of life and death, and its victory—at a great price—meant utter devastation for the other side, devastation that it very much sought to deny and to hide, especially from itself.

The kibbutz, like Zionism, culminated in the creation of an independent state, which was not exactly what it had dreamed of, and it struggled to find a path that would remain meaningful and purpose-driven in this new reality. It was tasked with the absorption and integration of Holocaust survivors and immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries, and it dealt with these tasks in ways that left a lot to be desired. It oscillated between staunch militarism and machoism on the one hand and winds of cosmopolitanism and individualism on the other. After the changes of government in the 1980s, the kibbutz seemed to have become obsolete and was replaced with other values—mostly, with messianic religious values and with right-wing political ideologies. The kibbutz's relations with the state shifted over time, and it has turned from the jewel of its crown to a symbol of snobbery and elitism, to a vestige of the past, to the castigated dwelling place of

treasonous "leftists"—and, after October 7, 2023, back into the emblem of resilience and heroism. Israel is a very unstable place, especially in recent years, and it is impossible to talk about its present, let alone its future, with any kind of certainty. But it is notable how the kibbutzim, which numerically never constituted more than a small percentage of the population, continue to encapsulate everything that Israel's citizens—and expatriates—admire, love, hate, miss, or grieve for about the state.

And then there is the story of each and every kibbutz as its own entity, an entity that always began with a dream and with determination to make the best out of the place—the physical environment—and out of the people. The story of each kibbutz, regardless of the year when it was established and its geographical location, is that of a tedious attempt to break the million-dollar bill of the dream into the pennies and dimes of everyday life. It meant transforming the anarchic tendencies of a bunch of twenty-year-olds into a structure of committees, rotations, budgets, assemblies, bylaws, and regulations. It meant figuring out how to deal with poverty and how to deal with affluence; how to manage a situation in which there are too few people and how to manage a situation in which there are too many people; what to do with couples, children, and elderly when they start appearing on the scene; and how to handle, time and again, conflict and crisis and hopelessness. Every kibbutz struggled from its very first day to translate the language of ideals into the language of reality, to live here on earth what was conceived in the clouds above. Living the ideals here on earth means living them with Rivka and Nahum and Yitzhak and Sarah, each with their own flaws and vices and challenging personality traits, and even more complicated, it means struggling with the complex dynamics between the first generation and the second and third generations, between those who created the dream and those who were forced to inherit it. There is no way that the unavoidable gap between dream and reality, which manifests itself a thousand times each day, would not be the cause of ongoing disappointment and frustration—and to me, there is something admirable about the determination to persevere not only despite the disappointment and frustration, but *because* of them.

The kibbutz cannot continue to be considered a success story as it had been for many years. Knowing what prices were extracted from its members, knowing that it was never a classless society even if resources were technically distributed equally, and knowing that in most cases the kibbutz's economic structure proved wasteful and unsustainable does not allow for the judgment that this was the one case in history when communism seemed to have worked pretty well. And yet, I believe that philosopher Martin Buber was on the mark when he wrote back in 1945, "On the soberest survey and on the soberest reflection one can say that, in this one spot in a world of partial failures, we can recognize a non-failure—and, such as it is, a signal non-failure."[142] To be sure, if we assess the kibbutz vis-à-vis the ideas of utopian socialism upon which it was founded in the 1910s or 1920s or 1930s, it has absolutely failed. But if we think of the kibbutz as an ongoing,

unwavering attempt to try to create a somewhat better society for humans to live in, while tackling the infinite psychological and social and financial and administrative challenges that such an attempt entails, in keeping with changing times and changing values, than it is most certainly a non-failure, indeed a remarkable non-failure. The dream lives on, while also shattering time and time again.

Notes

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Here on Earth tells the story of the kibbutz, a daring social experiment in collectivized living, from its inception in the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. The book weaves the history of the kibbutz into the greater stories of Jewish revival in Palestine, the emergence of the modern State of Israel, and Israeli society and culture, and it explores the experiences and challenges of kibbutz life throughout a century of ongoing transformations. Offering a lens that is at the same time critical and empathetic, *Here on Earth* is an invitation to discover the complicated and multifaceted history of a fascinating human invention.

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Cover: German youth from Aliyat HaNo'ar dancing the Hora at kibbutz Ein Harod