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The Kibbutz Sheds Socialism and Gains Popularity

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KIBBUTZ YASUR, [Israel](#) — For much of Israel's existence, the kibbutz embodied its highest ideals: collective labor, love of the land and a no-frills egalitarianism.

But starting in the 1980s, when socialism was on a global downward spiral and the country was mired in hyperinflation, Israel's 250 or so kibbutzim seemed doomed. Their debt mounted and their group dining halls grew empty as the young moved away.

Now, in a surprising third act, the kibbutzim are again thriving. Only in 2007 they are less about pure socialism than a kind of suburbanized version of it.

On most kibbutzim, food and laundry services are now privatized; on many, houses may be transferred to individual members, and newcomers can buy in. While the major assets of the kibbutzim are still collectively owned, the communities are now largely run by professional managers rather than by popular vote. And, most important, not everyone is paid the same.

Once again, people are lining up to get in.

"What we love here is the simplicity," said Boaz Varol, 38, who rides his bike along wooded pathways to work at the swimming pool, once for communal use, that he rents and runs as a private business at Kibbutz Yasur, in the rolling hills of the Western Galilee, northeast of Haifa. "Everyone does what they want, we have our independence, but without the kind of competition you find outside."

Two years ago he bought a two-bedroom home here for his young family for \$71,000. More than 60 other young adults have joined in the past four years, increasing the number of residents by half and bringing new life to an aging population.

The Varols are part of a growing trend. In April, Kibbutz Negba, in the south, accepted 80 new members in one day. Many kibbutzim have waiting lists — mostly former residents who want to return, but also urbanites looking to escape the rat race.

The kibbutzim were once austere communes of pioneers who drained the swamps, shared clothes (and sometimes spouses) and lived according to the Marxist axiom, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

Today, most are undergoing a process of privatization, though kibbutz officials prefer a more euphemistic term: renewal.

The new kibbutz seeks a subtler balance between collective responsibility and individual freedom, with an emphasis on community and values. Its drawing points include a safe environment, usually in the heart of nature, away from the cities scarred by suicide bombings; excellent day care and education; and an improved quality of life at out-of-town prices.

This is quite a change from recent years. By 2000, more than half of Israel's 257 collective farms were bankrupt.

The economic crisis exposed a festering ideological one. The second generation of kibbutz offspring — who slept in communal children's houses with assigned caregivers — began to rebel. With the lifetime security that the kibbutz was supposed to offer in jeopardy, young people began to leave.

“By the end of the 1990s,” said Gavri Bargil, executive director of the Kibbutz Movement, an umbrella organization, “you could find kibbutzim with no young generation at all.”

Worse, after decades of hard work, the kibbutz founders, now in their 80s and 90s, were left with not even an apartment or a pension to call their own.

Part of the recovery involved selling the Israeli dairy giant Tnuva, a cooperative half-owned by the kibbutzim. The sale provided them \$500 million to establish pension funds.

In the past, kibbutz members were rewarded equally, whether they milked cows or managed a large industry. On the new kibbutz, members earn salaries or receive end-of-month allowances reflecting the income they bring in.

“It is not total equality, but basic equality,” Mr. Bargil said. “You earn more, you pay more internal kibbutz taxes, and you get a bit more at the end of the month.”

The taxation provides a safety net for the financially weak. “From that point of view, we've maintained something of the old values,” said Yaakov Lazar, secretary of Kibbutz Nachshon, between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, which went over to the new system last year.

Yasur, established in 1949, had failed. Its textile and toy factories were unprofitable and closed. “Those of us left in our 50s wondered who would look after us in another 20 years,” said Ami Kilon, who was born here in 1951.

Then Yasur began its renewal and began to recruit new members in 2003. The empty kibbutz houses are now nearly filled, and Yasur plans to sell plots for new housing on former farmland.

About half the kibbutzim have moved into real estate, selling plots for luxury neighborhoods in place of the fields and orchards outside their gates. House buyers generally do not join the kibbutz, but pay for services like child care.

Next year the Varols must decide if they want to become full members of Yasur, buying a stake in communal assets like the dairy and chicken farm. If not, they can remain as private residents.

“The new kibbutz is not perfect, but economically things are improving,” said Mr. Kilon, who manages Yasur and another kibbutz nearby. “The incentive to work has gone up, and after changes in the management, we are standing on our feet.”

Not all kibbutzim followed this kind of strategy. About 30 percent stuck to their socialist principles. But many of them are flourishing, too.

“I get calls every day from people who want to join,” said Yaniv Sagee, the secretary of Kibbutz Ein Hashofet. “I don’t have room for them.”

Ein Hashofet, a pastoral haven of well-tended manicured lawns, art and culture south of Haifa, has not introduced varying wages. The communal dining room still functions — though diners must pay for their food these days.

Ein Hashofet can afford to remain a classic kibbutz because its spotless factories are highly profitable. One of its founders, Yehudit Kotzer, 92, still works four hours a day in one of them. “It’s very sad what’s happening on the other kibbutzim,” she said. “But we’re O.K.”

Mr. Varol was born on a kibbutz in the far north, but he left at 18. He is at peace in his new home, but bitter about the past. “My parents worked all their lives, carrying at least 10 parasites on their backs,” he said. “If they’d worked that hard in the city for as many years, I’d have had quite an inheritance coming to me by now.”

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