

Daniel Gavron

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In this interview, Daniel Gavron discusses the emergence, importance and decline of the kibbutz.

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How did the idea of the kibbutz originate?

Well, originally, the kibbutzim were merely a way of the early pioneers, the Jews who came here in the turn of the century to organize themselves, to get together and survive. They came with various revolutionary ideas and among them - they were influenced by socialism in Russia and the countries where they came from - the ideas that were germinating there.

But basically, it was the best way of organizing poverty. They found that if they lived collectively and communally they could survive economically, survive socially. It was an inhospitable land. Remember they came to a desert, basically, that was Palestine at the turn of the century and just after the turn of the 20th Century I should emphasize. And they had to survive somehow. They had to survive and they felt they could do it better together than individually. So, that's how it started. And, again, the first kibbutz was one of the communes that were formed and it was the first that stayed in one place. There were other communes that moved around, working here, where there. So that became the first kibbutz as it were.

What was life like in the early days of the kibbutz?

Well, the very first kibbutz of course, didn't have children and then a child came along and then another child and they had to decide what to do. In fact, [in] the very first kibbutz, the children always lived at home. They never went to live in a dormitory as happened with later kibbutzim. On the other hand, they decided very early on that it was the collective's responsibility to raise the children and it was everyone's responsibility. The children belonged to all of us and we are all responsible for looking after them.

And there were other ways in which they lived tremendously collective lives, [that is] the communal life. For example, it sounds almost comical today, but the first time someone suggested or brought in chairs into the communal dining room, this was regarded as a betrayal as socialism. Because you have to be on benches together, comrades all working together and not individual chairs. That's an example. The first time someone made a cup of tea in his room, of course there was no electricity, but they maybe made it on a kerosene stove, this was regarded as a betrayal. You must have a collective life all together in the communal dining room, so it was very extremely communal in the early days.

I would say the very beginning was maybe not so extreme and then it

became enormously very, very extreme as the kibbutz then expanded and became more ideological and the youth movements were created to serve the kibbutzim and there was a mutual exchange [between] the youth movement and the kibbutz.

During that period, between the 20's and 30's was probably when it was mostly fiercely communal and this it was very, very, very - you know, the collective and the commune was everything. The individual was nothing.

How much control did the kibbutz have over peoples' lives?

Well, of course, the kibbutz handled everything. Actually the very first kibbutz began where there were initial salaries, but they soon got round to a communal structure where there was no such thing as a salary, where everybody contributed to according to his ability or her ability and received according to his or her needs. And everything was collectively owned. Everything belonged to the community and you got what you needed. For example, you worked. You worked where the group decided you work. It might have been a general meeting, it might have been in committees, but on the whole you worked where you were told to work by the collective.

And at the same time you received what you needed. You received food, you received clothing, you received housing, accommodation. Your children received education and upbringing. Actually you had a situation where, for example, people couldn't even own their clothes. So that, you know, a thin guy might get this huge baggy shirt and pair of pants and the fat fellow might find himself in a pair that he could hardly get on. And these sort of things happened in the early days of the kibbutz, because private ownership was regarded as bourgeois, as out, as wrong, as not socialist.

What was the impact of the kibbutz on the development of the state of Israel?

Well, there's no doubt that the kibbutz is largely responsible for the existence of the state of Israel. A kibbutz is a contribution to building the new nation of Israel, which the Jews decided to build here in their ancient homeland and what they regarded as their biblical birthright. [It] was hugely influenced by the kibbutzim who made an enormous contribution.

If you look at the borders -- today there's a lot of talk politically about the borders between Israel and Palestine. The 1967 borders, so-called, the West Bank was not in Israel and the Gaza Strip was not in Israel. These were determined by where the kibbutzim were. Where the kibbutzim were established and flourishing, that's where the border ran. So, they marked out the border to start with, very much so in the north, in the west, in the south, everywhere. Where there were kibbutzim there was Israel. So, that was vital. Then they provided basic, very strong communities living all over the country and they provided a major part of the

agriculture. As time went on, they also produced a large amount of the industrial output. They contributed out of all proportion politically.

The first two Prime Ministers were kibbutz members, Ben-Gurion and Eshkol. And later, at the first cabinet of Israel, I think nearly half were kibbutz members. The parliament, a fifth were kibbutz members. Army commanders, initially all the army and military commanders in Israel needed its army in order to survive. These were kibbutz members. It provided leadership later in business, in the trades unions, in the economy, in the regions, everywhere. So, the kibbutz contribution to the building of Israel was enormous. And I would go as far as to say that with the kibbutz, there wouldn't have been a state of Israel.

How did the kibbutz move from community owned to privatization?

Privatization of housing - we should stress here that privatization generally means that you take a national resource and make it into private business. In the kibbutz it means different things. In the kibbutz, kibbutz privatization really means individualization of things. It's called privatization, but that's what it means.

For example, privatization of budgets. As I explained to earlier, everyone got a shirt, everyone got a pair of pants, everyone got food, everyone got this and that. And then they privatized it. That means that everyone got a wage or salary. Initially it was equal. This was regarded as privatization, because then the guy could decide or the woman could decide to buy a dress or to buy an armchair or a sofa or a television set. In other words, it wasn't the community that decided. So privatization as they called it was a very important thing.

Now later, food became privatized. People had food budget. They paid for their meals. Then the communal dining room, the children came home to sleep. In all the kibbutzim this was a privatization. And now the latest stage is the privatization of housing and that, of course, [is] an enormous change, because it means that the idea that the community ends everything, the cooperative ends everything has been jettisoned.

Today, individuals own things. Individuals not only own their shirt and pair of pants and armchairs and television set, but they're going to now own their own house. And they will be able to bequeath this house to their children privately just like anyone else in the United States or Europe or Israel or anywhere in the world. Up until now, the kibbutz member has not been able to do this. This is a huge change from collective communal life to private life.

What led to the crisis?

The kibbutz crisis came in 1985 when economically the kibbutzim all but collapsed. Large numbers of kibbutzim faced financial ruin. And the actual collapse of the kibbutzim and thereby the kibbutz movement was an economy matter, but it really represented problems that were much deeper. You see, until 1985 - I'm giving this date as a sort of cutoff date - but until 1985, the kibbutz member could always say to himself, well, there are problems we're not so sure

about whether our way of life is better than the way the rest of the world lives, but it works. It works. The kibbutzim flourished, they produced wonderful agricultural produce, industrial produce. People live there. There's a wonderful education system. The children grow up well. Everything's good, it's working.

After this, after the economic crisis hit, they couldn't say that any more. And, therefore all sorts of other things started coming out, all sorts of problems that had always existed but had been, in a way, pushed into the background. And they emerged because of the economic crisis and they are such things as the women. The woman kibbutz members, and half the kibbutz members are women, and the idea was that they would be liberated. Liberated from, not child bearing, of course, that's impossible, but liberated from bringing up their children, liberated from laundry, liberated from cooking, liberated from all the cares that women normally have. Of course, this was nonsense. What happened was that the woman, instead of bringing up her own children would bring up other people's children as a nurse in the communal nursery. Instead of doing her family's laundry was doing the commune laundry. Instead of her cooking lunch for her family, [she] was cooking lunch for the entire community. So that all that happened really was that the women were made into a different type of slave.

Now, this was against the idea. The kibbutz had hoped to liberate the woman, to make her free, to make her equal. But it didn't happen. And this was a cause of profound discontent for women throughout the kibbutz movement and this came out very strongly in with the collapse.

And then there was the larger question, also largely concerning women, the bringing up of children. They felt that they didn't have enough of their own children. [There was] this question of ideology in many kibbutzim, you're not supposed to hug and kiss, you're not supposed to be affectionate, this is bourgeois. Let's bring up the children coolly, professionally, in groups. They will be members of a group of their peers, their own age group and they will grow up socialistic and contributing and everything like that.

Now, this succeeded amazingly in that the kibbutz children grew up into intelligent, forceful, enterprising, hard working constructive individuals. But they did not grow up as socialists. They didn't believe in the commune, they didn't believe in communism and socialism. They did learn to work, to take responsibility to cooperate, to work together. They were a wonderful crowd of people. They still largely run the state of Israel [and] are responsible for much of the good things in this country. But the socialist dream of communism, of living together in a group didn't work.

How did the economic crisis manifest itself?

The kibbutzim were forced to borrow money when the economic crisis struck. In fact, that's even putting the cart before the horse, because what happened was the kibbutzim borrowed money and that was largely what caused the economic crisis. Why did they borrow the money? Because the kibbutzim had

no equity. They lived on credit. Everything they did was based on that money they borrowed. As long as the system worked, that was fine, they paid back the money. But when the situation arrived when they stopped being so profitable, it caused an enormous crisis.

They had to borrow for many reasons. One reason they had to borrow was the decision we talked about earlier where the children were brought home. This meant that the simple, one room kibbutz apartment for the member had to become a three or four room department where the children could also sleep at home. So that involved a lot of investment.

And then there was investment in the standard of living. Every kibbutz had a swimming pool. Every kibbutz had a basketball court. Every kibbutz had a gym and a sports field. They had very nice. Several of them had theaters or at least auditoriums. And a lot of money was invested in these things and the kibbutzim borrowed this money in order to build these things.

Now, where the money was invested into profitable enterprise, it didn't cause problems. But where it was invested into building a lovely large luxurious dining room like in a first class restaurant or in a swimming pool or in a theater or in various other [things], or even larger housing for the children, this did not generate profit and then they couldn't pay the money back. So, this caused an enormous amount of problems. All the years the kibbutzim managed, they kept going. They were always able to somehow at the last minute solve their problems. But then after the mid-1980's, after 1985, they weren't able to any more.

Why were children allowed to live with their parents in the 1980's?

I think that was because the taboo was broken. The very first kibbutz, as I said, the children used to sleep at home. The idea was functional, simply in the 1920's and 30's when the kibbutzim were very poor and they lived for many years in tents or very primitive huts, they wanted the children to live a better life. So, they built them houses and the children lived in houses - at least even if the adults couldn't afford to. However, certain stages became an ideology. The kibbutzim which originally really had only brought the children into this communal sleeping framework as a convenience, as almost a necessity, an economic necessity, made an ideology out of it. And they said that this was the way to bring up children communally and collectively. They would be part of a communal group. They wouldn't be under the tyranny of a bourgeois mother and father. They would be free members of the children's society living with their own age group.

And this sounded very nice. But it was enormously frustrating for parent, particularly for mothers who really felt they weren't getting enough of their children. They weren't being with them enough. They weren't seeing them enough. They weren't being able to give them enough love.

And in the 1970's and 80's when individualism became more okay, the unspeakable was spoken. People wouldn't dare say things against the group in the 1920's and 1930's and 1940's, even 1950's. They may dare a few of them,

but they would have been cautious. It was a taboo and once the taboo was broken, there was a huge rebellion.

I myself lived on a kibbutz and the reason I and my wife left was because we wanted to have our child at home. And, we were told by our kibbutz friends, "Oh, no, it's a better way and it's more convenient and it's easier and come on, forget it. And it's better for the kids." And yet those very children who grew up that way were the ones that insisted on changing it. And if you talk to a kibbutz member today in their 40's and 50's, and you say what was it like living [there], they say it was wonderful, it was terrific fun. A wonderful experience and the children today living at home are missing it.

Well, would you put your children into that? Good god no. No way. I don't know how my parents did it. And there's a sort of ambivalence here you'll appreciate.

What was the impact of the abolition of communal sleeping?

I don't think that the abolition of communal sleeping is all that important. It was perhaps important in the sense that it broke a taboo. That it did the unthinkable, but I don't think it really change anything from an ideological point of view or from the point of view of the values of the members. It didn't make them less equal, less communal, less communistic, less dedicated to cooperation and helping each other.

In my opinion the introduction of private sleeping of the children coming home didn't change the kibbutz radically. It may have changed something in the atmosphere and a lot of people said and say it was the beginning of the end. I disagree with this. I think that even with the children sleeping at home, there was still equality among members. There was still cooperation among members. There was still common ownership of the kibbutz. And all the essential things were still there. And I think that this has been exaggerated. It did seem to everyone a big revolution, a very big change in the way of life of the kibbutz. But I think it was a change that if anything helped preserve the kibbutz, helped to go longer, helped it keep going longer than it would have done otherwise.

In a way, the so-called privatization of food has been more, because the communal dining room was such an enormously important symbol and center of life on the kibbutz. I think that was bigger than communal sleeping in changing the communal way of life. You go to a kibbutz today, you go into the dining hall, there's nobody there. This was completely the center of everything in the past. You saw the films there. You had your general weekly meeting there. You had your discussions there. You had your meals there. You socialized there. You flirted there, sometimes even had affairs there. But this was always the very center of the life of the kibbutz. And this has changed enormously.

With regard to communal sleeping, I think it was a profound change of style, but I don't think it was a change of substance. I don't think it really changed the communal cooperative socialist egalitarian nature of the kibbutz, not in my opinion.

So, what was it made the kibbutz change toward a more individual attitude?

Well, the kibbutz started off fairly communal, got more extremely communal and then steadily became more and more private, over the years.

The first thing, I think, was clothes. People started having their own clothes. The days when the fat guy got clothes that he could hardly get into and the thin guy was swamped in huge baggy trousers and shirt were over. People had their own clothes.

And then you had, extending from that, people had their own budgets. You didn't have wages paid out, differential wages where somebody who worked at a harder job or at a more responsible job got more. But people got individual budgets. They could spend the way they wanted to. In other words, they could buy a sofa. They could buy a television. They could be a sound system, a recording system. They could buy toys for their children. They could purchase all sorts of things they wanted, they could decide, "Do I prefer to have a new dress or would I rather have a nice arm chair? Would I like a cover for the bed or would I like some new books? Would I like some gramophone records or would I (when computers came along) will I get a computer?" These things were then privately decided because people had their own money, even if it was still equal. So, that was a huge move towards privatization.

Then you had the privatization of electricity. For a long, long time the kibbutzniks, the kibbutz members, simply had as much electricity as they wanted. So, they would leave the air conditioning on all day in the summer and the heat on all day in the winter or at night. And huge electricity bills were run up. And then somebody had the brilliant idea of putting in electricity meters. And it was interesting that just putting in the meters already saved a huge quantity of electricity and then they started charging for electricity. In other words the person would have his yearly budget and he would get his allocation for clothes or for holidays or for a couch or whatever. And he would also get for electricity and he'd have to pay his electricity out of this budget. And this saved even more.

Take food in the dining room. The dining room was communal. All the kibbutz members used to come and eat as much as they wanted there [and] take away to their rooms food to eat. And this was unlimited. And then they started charging for food. One of the things that happened they say [is] that the dogs in the kibbutzim became much more healthy because they started getting dog food instead of huge amounts of kibbutz food that the kibbutzniks, the kibbutz members took, because it didn't cost them anything. And, so food became more private. And then what we talked about earlier, sleeping arrangements became more private and the children came and slept at home. And more and more the family became the unit and less and less communal collective group. And more and more and more throughout the years, they became more individual until after the economic crisis and the big revolution of the mid-1980's. Then you started getting inequalities and this was the first time that I think the values of the kibbutz

changed.

This was where somebody who was perhaps the manager of the factory or foreman or who worked overtime would get paid more than the simple worker or the guy who just worked his regular eight hours. This was when the person who worked outside the kibbutz and earned perhaps a very large salary, which he paid into the communal purse now, kept it. So the kibbutzim began to be unequal. This is after 1985, really after 1990, through the 90's. And today, in many kibbutzim, people receive wages just like anywhere else. In some cases, it might be graded. For example, the high wage earner may be only allowed to keep half of his extra wage. But it's different.

That to my mind is the crucial change in the kibbutz, when the members stopped getting equal resources, when the principle of "from each according to his ability - to each according to his needs" was changed and people got what they earned or what they were worth.

And even within the kibbutz they brought in advisers from the outside that said "Well, the guy who's looking after the kibbutz gardens is worth this and this per month. The guy who manages the kibbutz factory is worth that much per month. The teacher in the school is worth so much and the childcare worker in the kindergarten is worth this much." And everyone got their own wage. Just as anywhere else in the world or in Israel or anywhere. This had not happened before in the kibbutz. And you have inequalities. People are now allowed to extend their houses, not just for the children to sleep in, [but] because they want a larger and more comfortable, more airy, more spacious home. People are allowed to buy cars and own them privately. This is not the case in every kibbutz, but in the vast majority.

So, that all this communal ownership and all this equality among the members was changed and has changed now. To my mind, the change in the wage structure has been the crucial one, whereby instead of everyone getting the same, people now get different.

Have we seen the end of the kibbutz?

I think that the kibbutz saga is over for the time being. That is to say that almost all the kibbutzim are going to become suburbs. In some cases they're almost in towns already. There will be a few small communes like there are some in various urban centers in Israel. There will be a few communes in the desert, in the Galilee, around the country, just as there are in the United States or in Britain or Europe. But the large kibbutz movement, which contributed so much to the creation of Israel and was such a central part of its society is finished. The kibbutzim are going to become villages, suburbs, ordinary communities. There may be one or two who keep going, but not for very long.

It could be that one day there'll be some sort of revival and communal movement will emerge again. There's an enormous amount of creativity in Israel, of invention, of thinking. And I think there could be a lot of social creativity too.

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And something could emerge in the future.

But the kibbutz movement that started in 1910 with the creation of the kibbutz in my opinion has come to the end of it's present phase and will not continue more than another dozen years at the most. That's my opinion.