

Noa Shamir-Ronen

Kibbutz Ginosar resident, daughter of Moshe Abes

In this interview, Noa, the daughter of Moshe Abes, relates how she has observed changes in the kibbutzim' attitudes toward socialism and privatization.

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THIS TRANSCRIPT IS TRANSLATED FROM HEBREW

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

OK, I'm Noa Shamir-Ronen and I am a member of Kibbutz Ginosar. My parents are among the founders of the kibbutz. I am principal of the regional school for grades 1 to 8 serving two kibbutzes and one community-based town. I am almost 43 years old and I have three children. The oldest is in the Israeli Navy serving on a missile boat. I have a son who's beginning high school, 14 years old and an 11-year-old daughter. I was their school principal, both of them.

Why do many second- and third-generation Ginosar members want to leave the kibbutz?

Look, the kibbutz is small and the nature of the kibbutz, where everyone has to be the same - that bothered them. The temptations are outside. I think those that stayed, stayed thanks to the changes. If changes hadn't been made, I wouldn't be here either. Because you work and you give all you got, and you work very hard, at several jobs, and in return you get the same as somebody who doesn't work. The children lived in a Children's House - something that many women who came from outside, who married kibbutz members, or husbands, wouldn't accept. They didn't like the idea. Yes, mainly those who are married to non-kibbutzniks.

You raised your children in a Children's House?

I raised my eldest son in children's quarters, up to second or third grade, but not the other two fortunately. I don't know how I could have done it with the first.

Why did you raise your first son in the children's quarters but not the other two?

My eldest son, I raised him in the children's quarters. I was a young mother. I was married to a kibbutz member. That's how it was where we grew up. It seemed natural to me. And everybody put their kids in the children's quarters. And anyone who dared not to, or brought them in later, was reprimanded, severely criticized. So I decided I would go with the stream, stay in line, and that it was OK. But I was young, and I hadn't yet formed an identity of my own. Adolescence, for kibbutzniks, happens somewhere in their thirties.

And the other two [began] to start running over in the middle of the night because somebody couldn't handle them - the night watch woman. So I decided they would stay by me. And my husband said that cubs should be by their mother.

What is your overall opinion of the sleeping quarters?

For me, it was excellent. I have wonderful memories, although I have lots of fears, as does my daughter, so maybe it's a personality thing. But the memories, of playing pranks on the night watch woman, and being together with other children your age. So that if I would have had to live with my parents, and sleep at home - my sister, who is older than me, is eight years older - we probably would have slept together in the same room, and the rooms were terribly small, the houses. So to sleep with her, when I hardly knew what my own name was and she already had a boyfriend, every move I made would have annoyed her. So I think it would have been impossible. And with my parents over my head... It was very, very good [for me in children's quarters]. I remember it as a really good experience. I think having mentioned that our adolescence came relatively late, then [in contrast] the whole matter of friends and friendships happened very early. I mean, it wasn't understood at first, but we were boys and girls together, of different ages, and this led to friendships. And the parents were far off. Things were quite liberal which I wouldn't want for my own daughter.

As a mother, are you're opposed to communal sleeping quarters for children?

I, as a mother, won't allow my children... when I tell them we slept like that they can't believe it. I guess it's a question of what you're used to.

Do you have any psychological residues from that period?

I have fears, but I don't remember having them as a child. There was a night watch woman and there was also a loudspeaker in the children's quarters. If there were some problem, you'd call out "Watch-woman!" because we didn't know her name. They changed every week. It was a rotation duty. I myself stood watch as an adult. And she would come and take care of us. And we learned to help each other. There was very strong mutual responsibility. Children helped other children.

Did you ever consider leaving the kibbutz?

I considered leaving twice. It's more of a personal matter. I don't know if it has anything to do with being a kibbutz member. This is my second marriage [and] everyone is in the kibbutz, the former family and the present one, the parents of [my husbands]. I felt it was wrong to all be simmering in the same pot too much. That was the first time.

The second time, [the kibbutz] had just switched to the family sleeping arrangement in a very disorderly fashion. And we were sleeping on top of each other. We are six children, and there was nowhere to sleep, no intimacy. And then [the kibbutz] decided they would renovate [our house] for us. Then things got stuck and it took a very long time. And we were living in a different house, but it was very, very small. And then I said that if things didn't change, I couldn't see myself living here any longer. And also, the whole subject of the changes, the whole change the kibbutz underwent. If it hadn't happened, I wouldn't be here although I see many advantages [to living in the kibbutz]. I got to study for my Master's degree. I got my degree while my children were being taken care of. Everything was subsidized, paid for. I was free to study, no worries. And I improved myself, not that I wouldn't have done it without Kibbutz Ginosar. But if the place hadn't changed, I wouldn't be here today.

Describe the night watch women who looked over the children in the sleeping quarters.

Sometimes it was people with no connection whatsoever to education because it was rotation duty. Everybody did it whether they were qualified or not. And if a child is crying and it isn't yours, who has the patience? They'd take him roughly by the hand, they'd slap him, and [the children] had no protection. There was no one to supervise what was happening.

I remember, on watch, as a young girl - the minute you're out of high school, 12th grade, you'd get your set of notes: mess hall duty, night-watch duty, Sabbath work duty. "You're a kibbutz member, take all the [duty] notes!" - So I was on watch duty and there was a little boy who cried terribly all night long. He simply wanted his parents. Now his father slept on the floor beside him, anything but to take him home because of what people would say. For weeks he slept on the floor and got up in the morning to work. And I said to him, "Listen, this is my first night watch duty, and it's my job. I go to sleep in the morning. You have to go work. I'll lie by him at night." And all week long the other watchwoman did the rounds between the children's quarters, and I lay by him. And he woke up every five minutes, "Where's daddy, where's daddy?" I said, "Daddy went to sleep, but I'm here." At first he cried terribly.

Now, as a mother, it tears my soul apart. At six months I put my child in the children's quarters. He'd fall asleep early, so the watchwoman wasn't even on duty yet. So we'd put him there and pop over every once in a while. Simply amazing, amazing. Today I'd never do such a thing.

You say that if it weren't for the changes in the kibbutz, you wouldn't have stayed. How did these changes enter your life?

The changes, as far as I'm concerned, are two things. One is the family sleeping arrangement [switching] from communal sleeping quarters to family sleeping.

The second is the differential salary. It became worthwhile to work. If in the past we used to work because of values, now there are new values. The supreme value - we are ordinary human beings - is money. And quality of living. And the promise to our children, that they will get something. Maybe we'll be able to give them something. And both me and my husband, we both work very, very hard. We always did. Even before the changes took place and definitely after the changes. And I really was blessed and I studied. I got the chance to enjoy everything the kibbutz had to offer - a fantastic childhood, wonderful culture, and values of mutual responsibility, of helping others, and of immense caring alongside the belief that everyone should be the same; and to study, and to get a house. You saw the house, that it is a very big one.

And thanks to the changes, we saved penny to penny. This is the fifth year or the sixth year we are in privatization. And I as a school principal. I also work at Katsrin College teaching. And my husband who works at two jobs, we managed to get our own private, car. Two weeks ago. At the age of forty-almost-three I have a car! I have independence.

That's the ultimate independence. You can go somewhere whenever you want, you don't have to sign up for a car on the communal schedule.

And this change, for me, is excellent. I really feel that I had the chance to enjoy the best of both worlds. As a young child, communal education was very good for me and in the kibbutz the way it used to be, the old kibbutz. Perhaps today it looks that way nostalgically, and back then it may have been more difficult because there certainly were difficulties because I was never one to go with the stream. I always tried to break loose. And today I enjoy the fact that I got an education and got a big house and I am definitely taking advantage of what the kibbutz gave me, to go on and improve myself.

What efforts did the kibbutz make to keep people from leaving?

No effort. Look, recently, the efforts have consisted of giving the young people as much economic comfort as possible. Making it easy on them, and although allegedly there is privatization, to continue paying for all kinds of things. And I don't support this, because I think it was good at the time, because then you weren't getting anything, either. But why can't they work just like everybody else? I don't think that today the kibbutz should have to pay for their education, or to give them a house. I mean, they have to start working for these things. Mutual responsibility also has its limits. And there still is a great deal of mutual responsibility. We haven't switched over to salaries. I mean, the salaries go into the kibbutz and a very large sum is deducted in order to support a very large population that doesn't work. I'm not talking about the old people, the elderly, the founding generation who gave us all this beauty we have here all around us here. We have to, we must help them to live respectably until the last days of their lives. There are young people here who don't work because there is no such thing here as income-security or employment agencies or unemployment payments. There is no such thing here because we're still a kibbutz. We're a kibbutz. We're not a community-based town [*translators note*: a particular form of town or community in Israel, where joining requires the agreement of the community, but people are economically independent] where it's each man to himself.

In the past before privatization, were efforts made to keep people from leaving?

They'd talk to them. They'd invite them over for a talk and talk it over with them but no more than that. They'd invite them to the kibbutz's birthdays, to social events, perhaps to arouse feelings of nostalgia. But what would they come back to? There are hardly any opportunities here for employment in the area, certainly not in the kibbutz. That was one of the reasons I had to buy a car. Because until now, everything was inside the kibbutz. I worked in the kibbutz. I studied, so the kibbutz supplied transportation regularly for that. The kibbutz took care of everything. Now, I have to spread my wings and find myself more employment in order to maintain my standard of living.

But regarding those who left, I don't know if it would have helped. I mean in the beginning, when people left, it looked like treason. Whoever left the kibbutz was considered a traitor. If he came he, came in the dark to see his parents. He didn't come to the dining hall to eat the Sabbath dinner. Later, once those kibbutz members left - and many left and the great majority of them succeeded nicely outside which goes to show that kibbutz education is not so bad - it encouraged others to leave, because they saw that it was possible to make

it outside and make it big. And it was very hard to persuade because they had no challenges here in the kibbutz.

Did the recent changes make the kibbutz more attractive or less attractive for the young people living here today?

For the young people living here today? I think the kibbutz, it's attractive only for its quality of living. Only for the quality of living. There's no culture here unfortunately. I say it and my heart weeps. All the beautiful culture we had here. You sat in the archive yesterday, you must have seen drawers upon drawers and files upon files of ceremonies and celebrations. It was amazing, the culture here. Youth movements. Today it's a wasteland, a wasteland in that respect. I think the direction in the future should be to build a community-based neighborhood nearby, to find sources of employment in the area for people, to attract them to come back. And then, once there are young people here again, because now there aren't many, it will give development a boost and then maybe there will be a return to the whole culture thing, and activities after school for children because there would be many children.

Is the kibbutz today a more attractive place for young people after the changes?

For the young people it isn't. The kibbutz today is not attractive for the young people. You see, you have quality of living here, there's grass, the sea, and definitely nice houses. But all the values we were raised on - mutual responsibility, togetherness, contribution to society, and the communal parties and celebrations, and the holiday festivities together, the secular character we created for the Hebrew tradition, the secular one, based on the Jewish one, of course - all this is gone today. And it's a terrible shame. To me it's a terrible shame. I mean, I feel my children are missing out. I try to do it at home, it has become more individual, more a household thing. At home I try to give them the values whether it be to celebrate each holiday, to light the Sabbath candles. It takes on more of the Jewish aspect and less the socialist one - the togetherness aspect, the secular, the agricultural aspect. I can't see it coming back.

The truth is that when I go to the community-town that was built by kibbutz-leavers, I see them trying to give [their children] this aspect. I myself, at the school, as the school principal, I bring in Bikkurim [*translator note*: the tradition of bringing in the first fruit, practiced on the Jewish agricultural holiday of Shavuot], the torch race on Hanukah, all of these traditions; bar-mitzva projects, historical family roots projects, contribution to the community. The children work with the elderly here. I think I succeeded in bringing this to the school, so they enjoy this, the children at the school. As a kibbutz, after school very little [is done]. The Movement. There's no Movement. No Youth Movement, summer camps, trips and hikes; parents hardly go on trips with their children. They don't know their own area.

Is it important for you that your children stay in the kibbutz? And if so, what future do you see for them?

It's important to me that they be happy in their lives. That's the first thing. My first instinct in answering your question whether it's important to me that they stay in the kibbutz is to say, "Yes." A good Polish-Jewish mother wants her children near by. But I ask, "Ok, what

will they do here?" They've already told me that they won't stay, by the way because they really don't see any opportunities here to develop themselves. I think it's also because of the location. I think if it was a kibbutz closer to the central region [of Israel], then maybe. Once again, if a community-based neighborhood were to be built, and families started coming here with their children, young families, good families, who have some interest in [re-]creating what there used to be here- not in the same way, but with the changes but at least the culture, and the education, I mean the informal education, because the formal education is good, - then I think they'll stay. That's the only way to keep them here: employment and a young community.

Is that how you see the future?

Yes. A community-based neighborhood. That's the plan, that's the Council's plan, to add another 1000 households here.