

Challenge and Response: The Environmental Crisis and the Kibbutz Movement

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate discussion. I am less interested in giving answers than I am to present the results of a lengthy work of academic research. I will begin by looking briefly at the development of communities, and look at the background of the kibbutz movement in the light of this model. I shall look at the crisis looming over Western civilization in general and look at the kibbutz response to this. I will open a discussion and suggest a possible future scenario. I hope that this will invoke a response among both kibbutz members and our many friends at home and abroad. My purpose is to stimulate a debate on these issues, which hopefully will lead to concrete and purposeful action.

Community Development

There is a life cycle in the development of communal impulses. Newly-set-up collectives are generally enthusiastic and this enthusiasm often declines as the more day-to-day tasks take on increasing urgency. The balance of Why and How changes over time. The honeymoon of a newly realized communal impulse has more Why, as it defines itself. The more pragmatic How will come after, as a technical challenge. As the movement becomes more entrenched and institutionalized the How questions take on more importance, and the Why becomes increasingly forgotten. This is a natural development, and a number of different strategies have been adopted in order to overcome this. Often a framework is set up, more or less rigid, which in some way

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can institutionalize the original inspiration. Much of the energy of the group will then be taken up with maintaining this framework.¹

Kibbutz Background

The intellectual background which fueled the early development of the kibbutz was an ideology based on Socialism. Many of the early members and founders of the kibbutz communities came from Eastern Europe and Russia in the first three decades of this century. Some were radical Marxists and revolutionaries who had to flee from Czarist Russia. Others were members of various factions of communism who had to flee Bolshevism and Leninism after the Russian Revolution. Others again were refugees from Stalinism in the late 1920s and 1930s.

These interpretations of Marxism, Socialism and Communism had in common the Zionism which brought them to British Mandated Palestine in order to build a new kind of Jewish society. Technical solutions to all problems were offered in a mechanical way and less emphasis was placed on the spiritual dimension. The intense, mystical attachment to the land represented by the work of A. D. Gordon is in contrast to this, and though important, was never adopted into the main stream ideology. In the specific historical situation of the Jewish people, solutions based on Zionism and Socialism together created the intellectual seedbed from which the kibbutz sprouted.

In environmental terms, these solutions included tree planting, greening the desert, and draining the swamps. At the time these were progressive, and indeed were seen as the leading environmental interventions available to us. Today, at the other end of the century, our criticism of this approach only goes to emphasize how sophisticated our ecological thinking has become during the last two generations. The trees might have been mixed species and more deciduous, greening the desert has led to problems with soil salinity, and now we are turning some of the drained areas back into swamps, recognizing the value of wetlands in the ecological web.²

The history of kibbutz can be traced in terms of service, of building something not for immediate gratification, but something which will benefit the wider community in some deep way. This aim of service was a response to the challenge of the situation of world Jewry in the

1. This paper was presented at the Fifth International Communal Studies Association Conference. Much of the background material for this section is based on material presented at previous ICSA conferences, especially those collected from the first conference and published as *Communal Life* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Books, 1987).

2. David Leichman and Idit Paz, *Kibbutz—An Alternative Lifestyle* (Yad Tabenkin, Israel: 1994). See especially the essay on Eco Zionism.

first half of the 20th century. In this sense all idealists serve a higher cause and in some cases the communality of a group is a side effect or a result of working together at this task.

In the specific situation of the early years of this century, this came out in practice to a number of clear ideals:

1. Settling the land; creating rural villages with an economy based an agriculture.
2. Planting trees; since 1901 some 200 million trees have been planted by the Jewish National Fund, many of these by kibbutz members in some capacity. Two-thirds of all forests in the country have been planted.
3. Building the country; creating a health service, a trade union movement, banking facilities, education and training centers.
4. Framing the borders; choosing sites for the kibbutz communities which would serve as security belts in areas where instability and violence threatened the population.
5. Feeding the nation; especially in the early years of the State of Israel the food grown by the kibbutz sector was an important contribution to the country's ability to feed itself.
6. Creating Utopia; at least improving social conditions within the communities, bringing them closer to an ideal situation.
7. Creating the new human being; the natural result of children being reared in such Utopian communities, with child rearing being a serious profession with specific social aims.

Today in 1995 these aims sound less convincing, not just because we have become less idealistic or more cynical, but simply because they seem outdated and out of place. The kibbutz movement began with the aim of building a country. Today that aim has been attained, and the movement has partly lost direction. This conference has seven papers dealing with the present kibbutz "crisis," and it does seem that as a movement we have less ideological direction than we had a generation ago, that we have much less support in the country, both from national institutions and from the general public, and that our financial situation is in a mess. Some commentators see the current discussions over the debts and land deals as a partial dismantling of the movement, and there are many both within the movement and outsiders, who see the possibility of a much reduced movement over the next few years. However, we are not alone in facing a crisis.

THE PRESENT CRISIS IN THE WORLD

What is the situation, the challenge, facing us as we enter the 21st century?

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Here in the Middle East it seems that our major tasks are in the fields of security and economics. These both have their environmental considerations and when we take a more global perspective, it does seem that wars and ailing economies are indeed symptoms of a society that has an unbalanced relationship to its natural environment. Wars are without a doubt one of our major ecological disasters, and even when they are not actually being fought, the environmental damage that is being done every day by the global defense industry is staggering indeed.

"Over the course of the twentieth century human population has increased more than threefold and gross world product perhaps twentyfold. Such expansion has placed increasing pressure on the ecology of the planet. Everywhere we look—in the atmosphere, oceans, watersheds, forests, soil, etc.—it is now clear that rapid ecological decline is setting in."³

The crisis in the kibbutz movement is reflected in a world-wide crisis in Western culture. We are not alone, and when we consider what is being faced today by the Western world, we can appreciate that our own existential problems are small by comparison.

We are coming to the end of 300 years of Cartesian philosophy, of three centuries where material, measurable and finite observation was considered to be the most important way to relate to our universe. The philosophy of Descartes led to social and industrial changes dominated by such thinkers as David Ricardo and Adam Smith. The industrial revolution is now 200 years old and obviously drawing to a close. This in turn led to the technological advances that we have experienced over the last century, especially the phenomenon of the motor car, and more lately the effect of electricity and electronics.⁴

We can isolate and point to certain events over the last generation that are symptomatic of the changes that are now taking place. I would hesitate to call these either causes or effects, but I do think they are illustrations. In 1967 the Six Day War changed the map of the Middle East, not only literally, but also the way of thinking, both within Israel and throughout the Arab nations. No longer was Israel a tiny beleaguered outpost on the verge of extinction, but had established itself and gradually had less need of the pioneering elite represented by the kibbutz movement. The Vietnam War revealed to a generation of Americans and Westerners that the government of the largest, and most powerful country in the world could not stand up to a peasant

3. John Bellamy Foster, "Global Ecology and the Common Good," *Monthly Review* (February, 1995).

4. E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1974). See also the sequel *Small is Possible* (George MacRobie, Jonathan Cape, 1981).

army wearing pajamas and riding bicycles, and was indeed corrupt and lying to its own constituency. In 1968 the Paris uprising showed that students could ally themselves with workers, and challenge the modern nation state with new ways of thinking and doing things. A year later photos of the earth were transmitted back from the moon landing trips, and for the first time we saw ourselves as we really are, a tiny blue planet, wonderful to look at, and one complete entity. And we all live here together.

Since then a new consciousness has been shaping, very much influenced by the last event, the sight of the earth as a single world. This can be summed up in scientific terms by the Gaia theory, developed by people who worked on the space programs during the sixties, and who saw the earth as a single, interconnected whole which was capable of self repair and maintenance. The new consciousness has subsequently spread throughout the scientific world, influenced heavily by the development of ecological studies, where life is seen much more in terms of interconnected webs rather than evolutionary linear progression.⁵

The Environmental Crisis in Israel

This in itself may be rather academic, and, indeed, much of this development has taken place far removed from the media and has little direct impact except upon a limited number of fellow academics. Were it not for the increasing impact of pollution upon our day-to-day living, the population at large may not have noticed these changes taking place. However, the life support system is beginning to break down, pollution is becoming obvious, and is taking its toll of both health and the quality of life. Major industrial disasters such as Chernobyl, Bhopal, and Love Canal reveal that something is seriously wrong.

Up to now we have been thinking globally; let us now think locally, for that is where action should and can begin. We have no shortage of environmental danger signals in our own part of the world, indeed, the kibbutz movement is one of the major polluters, both in agriculture and in industry. There is a lack of standards and controls, both nationally and within the movement. The environmental problems facing this

5. There is a large amount of literature on this subject; as a short list I would mention: Mihailo Mesarovic and Eduard Pestel, *Mankind at the Turning Point* (The Club of Rome, Signet: 1974); Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Wildwood House, 1975); Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (Wildwood House, 1982); H.V. Hodson, *The Diseconomies of Growth* (Pan Ballantine, 1972); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Theodore Roszak, *Person Planet* (Victor Gollancz, 1979); Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life* (Blond and Briggs, 1981); Hazel Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures* (Perigree Books, 1978).

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country today do not recognize the differences between kibbutz and the rest of society.

There is a tremendous garbage problem, with no real solution in sight. This can be seen by anyone leaving Tel Aviv for Jerusalem on the northern side of the highway. The treatment of dangerous substances at the main processing site of Ramat Hovav is also leading to great anxiety on the part of those who are monitoring the effects upon the surrounding wildlife and human population.⁶

Air pollution has recently become more newsworthy as the plans for the next major highway in this country gradually are released to the public. The combination of car exhaust fumes and industrial air pollution is a major threat to health.⁷

Water problems seem to have eased somewhat after the drought years of the 1980s gave way to several years of good rainfall in the early 1990s, but still play a great part in the peace negotiations. What is happening to the unseen deep aquifers is a cause of great concern to those who are planning the long term water strategies for the country.

Energy use is still profligate, with very little emphasis upon conservation. Space cooling and heating are generally electric-based, and little effort is made to insulate housing against the fluctuations of the outside temperature. Domestic energy use is particularly high within the kibbutz sector.

Agricultural pesticides are used widely, with virtually no controls. Their effect upon wildlife and ground water supplies are only barely documented and virtually unknown to the public.

Green areas are increasingly in short supply, as the country becomes one of the most crowded in the world. Plans for the kibbutz movement to sell off large areas, especially in the centre of the country, will only exacerbate this problem.⁸

Industry is still seen by most economists as the only way to strengthen the economy and build for the future. The kibbutz movement went through rapid industrialisation over the last few decades, and the economic success of some of those ventures is still regarded by many as a yardstick of desirable development.

Consumerism may be the phenomenon which will break up the kibbutz movement from within, as massive advertising campaigns stimulate people to equate success with buying power. Certainly kibbutz industries are willing to provide the products that feed consumerism.

6. Bilhah Givon, "Giving Land for Garbage," *Eretz Magazine* (May, 1994).

7. Peter Hirschberg, "Israel Goes NIMBY," *Jerusalem Report* (April, 1995).

8. Mordechai Shechter, "Highway Robbery," *Eretz Magazine* (September, 1994).

Security is of course an ever present concern in the Middle East, but has a direct impact upon the environment, not least when it comes to the amount of land needed for army training, the amount of work required to keep the defense forces in a state of readiness, and the acceptability of a nuclear defense program.⁹

The Kibbutz Response

Despite the fact that the kibbutz movement can rightly be regarded as one of the major polluters and environmental dangers to this country, it cannot be denied that some of the greatest environmental advances have been made by people who live on kibbutz. Here in the Middle East nothing is black and white.

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel was founded as a voluntary organization in 1953 to teach respect, understanding and love of the natural and historical heritage of Israel. Over one million people participate annually in the activities of the SPNI, the largest membership organization in the country, and per capita the largest environmental organization of any country in the world. Kibbutz members have played key roles in the founding and development of the SPNI.

Adam Teva VDin was founded by a kibbutz member a few years ago, and has grown to be one of the most powerful champions of the environment in the country. Drip irrigation, a major advance in efficient water use was largely developed, and its components are largely produced, by kibbutz communities.

A more revealing symptom may be the number of kibbutz members who sit on the Life and Environment committee. This body is the umbrella organization of Non Governmental Organisations who are concerned about the environment.

Conclusions

Apart from doing nothing, the kibbutz movement can respond in a number of ways to the global environmental crisis. One way would be to set up a central office to generate and coordinate projects. This is what has been done through the Green Room, and there are ongoing discussions to expand this initiative. Another response is for each kibbutz community to create environmental committees or working groups to deal with local issues. This kind of grass roots response is also taking place in an increasing number of communities.

9. David Pervin, "Viewpoint," *Jerusalem Report* (March, 1995).

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The effect of such a response to the environmental crisis may be to give the kibbutz movement a more positive image, making membership more attractive to outsiders. In some ways, we might see an ideological renewal, a return to the discussion of the existential Why. The original intention of the kibbutz movement was to build the land; today the intention of the movement is to look after the land, to be stewards and guardians of the land.

By introducing a debate on the environment in order to raise awareness we can reintroduce the Why back into our ideological discussion. In our relationship between us and our surrounding area, we should regard ourselves as examples and leaders of a radicalization of society. We should not face the future with the aim of changing our own values so they will fit in better with the surrounding society. Instead we should be looking to change the values of the surrounding society, making it better for human beings to live in, and more in harmony with the natural world.

In the present debate on the crisis of the kibbutz we are in danger of looking for alternatives for ourselves, instead of being the alternative, as we were in the early days.

"It is worth pointing out that the demand for environmental products and services has been growing rapidly to some extent making it the growth industry of the last decade. OECD data indicates that this industry on a global basis has yielded average growth rates of 5.5 per cent. Worldwide demand for environmental goods and services is expected to reach \$US400 billion this decade. (OECD estimates put the 1990 global demand for environmental products and services at \$US200 billion). The suggestion here is that 'ecology' can bring certain economic benefits whereby a given kibbutz can become part of a brand new 'industry' which combines economic sense and attractive lifestyle options."¹⁰

"The kibbutz thinks of itself as a serving elite; in the promotion of Sustainable Development it can become once more avant-garde for the benefit of the nation."¹¹

The present kibbutz crisis of identity—is a suitable moment to take a new direction, to once more assume a responsible role within developing Israeli and world society, and thus making the kibbutz one of the leaders of future social development. Only by taking a serious task seriously does the movement have relevance and historical necessity. The alternative is to disappear into comfort and selfishness.

10. Michael Kenneth Cowan, *Permaculture Services*.

11. Simone Maier, "Sustainable Development in the Kibbutz" (Foreign Research thesis, Witten/Herdecke University, Germany, 1994).