

Utopia and Reality: Some Contradictions and Challenges in Kibbutz Education

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HENRY NEAR'S INTERESTING ANALYSIS of the development of kibbutz thought raises questions of the Utopian and post-utopian character of the Israeli kibbutz.¹ Within the general framework of kibbutz society, few issues have been the subject of so much thought, research, innovation and soul-searching as education. If the kibbutz has Utopian aspirations, then its educational system—in ideology and practice—is considered the major vehicle to their realization and perpetuation.

When Thomas More coined the term "Utopia," he gave it an ambivalent meaning. On the one hand, the term is derived from "Eutopia—the good place" and on the other from "Utopia—no place."² This may have been More's little joke, but this ambivalence is really quite meaningful.

For example, in recent years kibbutz educators woke up to the fact that children do not internalize the values of communal living simply by being born in the kibbutz and being influenced by the way of life in the children's houses, schools and adult society. Strange as it may seem, this discovery came as a surprise. Today it is understood that not only the choice to live in a kibbutz—and many choose to live elsewhere—but even knowing and understanding kibbutz society do not come "naturally," with "breathing kibbutz-air."

So kibbutz educators have come to the conclusion that they have explicitly to "educate towards kibbutz," to write and implement specific

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1. Henry Near, "Utopian and Post-Utopian Thought: The Kibbutz as a Model," *Communal Societies*, 5(1985), 41-58.

2. Paul Turner refers to "the original pun—Utopia [not-place] and Eutopia [well-place]." T. More *Utopia* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), p. 133.

curricula for "teaching kibbutz." At this point, a serious discussion began: Which shall be taken as the educational model—the "ideal" kibbutz or the "real" one?

The ideal kibbutz is modelled on the fullest possible realization of its basic tenets, such as "equality of man's worth," "personal commitment to the community," "from each according to his ability—to each according to his needs," "being in the vanguard of Jewish national renaissance—socially, culturally and economically," "active participation in political struggles for social justice and socialism, peace and co-existence with the Arab peoples"... The real kibbutz, on the other hand, is a community of ordinary people—flesh and blood—who are driven not only by lofty spiritual ideals, but also by their human weaknesses and confusions, ambitions and passions, selfishness and desire for material benefits.

Focusing on the ideal model may be uplifting. Many young people are attracted to Utopia. But may this focus inspire not only enthusiasm but also some measure of distrust? May the teacher not suffer some loss of credibility? Students know the real kibbutz; they are very sharp observers of the manifold deviations from pure, undiluted kibbutz values. For these children, "the good place" becomes "no place."

Focusing on the real model, on the other hand, may indeed be practical, relevant to day-to-day issues, geared to solid ground and not to floating clouds on the horizon. But can this model in any way inspire young people? Will it encourage them to set high standards, to energize youth's natural need for ideals, to strive towards their realization? This dilemma is not a question of either the one or the other. Any meaningful educational approach implies striving towards the fullest possible integration of the two, towards thinking in terms of both. One without the other is meaningless.

Kibbutz education cannot but be based on integrations of this sort.³ Life as a whole, not only education, is characterized by numerous contradictions, dichotomies, polarities. The usual approach of choosing one or the other often results in a battle between factions holding opposing viewpoints. The two contradictory concepts—Utopia and reality—are in fact interrelated. To use a metaphor from physics, they are like the north and south poles, which are opposite but complementary, which have no existence independently but together define the magnetic field.

The question is often raised: "What is a kibbutz?" Is it a set of values, principles and ideals—a blueprint of Utopia—or is it a community of living people, whose ideas are in constant flux and may, in time, deviate considerably from the founders' ideals? Here again the choice in terms

3. The problem of contradictions and their integration is dealt with in greater detail in my article, "Who is Afraid of Contradictions?" *Hachinuch Hameshutaf*, 111 (1984), 11-17 [in Hebrew].

of "either... or" is absurd. The Kibbutz is both simultaneously Utopia and reality; a distinct value-set as well as a living, developing, ever-changing community.

Failure or Success?

Kibbutz education, beginning from early childhood, is geared to the socialization of children and youth towards communal life. Strong emphasis is placed both on the individual as well as the group to which he or she belongs. The "educational group"—varying in size from six at toddlers' age, to 25 at school age—is more than a class. It is a comprehensive social unit, in which children learn the interpersonal give-and-take of collective life, in which they experience collaboration, involvement and commitment. From elementary school-age onwards, children devote some time each day to work—from household-chores to agricultural work in special "children's farms." In high school, they begin to work, side by side with adult members, in the kibbutz's agricultural and industrial branches. Work is integrated in the students' weekly school schedule, usually one day a week. At all ages, but especially in adolescence, children enjoy a wide measure of democratic self-rule. According to one of the foremost kibbutz educators: "It was clear that the school was part of the community. It participated in the communal and cultural life. Work became part of the school-curriculum, as an educational value in itself. The children too lived in a communal situation, just like their parents."⁴

Kibbutz society keeps asking itself: "Is the socialization process, inherent in our educational system, a success or a failure?" This question also is phrased in the conventional dichotomous manner, which precludes a meaningful answer. In order to tackle this question, let us consider one of the major issues in kibbutz life—the manner in which young kibbutz-born men and women, on concluding their high-school education, relate to joining the kibbutz. Many kibbutz members evaluate the educational system as a dismal failure in socializing youth towards communal life and base their claim on the following facts:

1. Young people, after concluding their period of active service in the Israel Defence Forces [three years for men; two years for women; an additional year for those who volunteer to serve as officers] come back

4. Kerem M. "Aspects of Communal Education and Child-Raising" in Y. Agasi and Y. Darom (eds), *The Alternative Way of Life* (Proceedings of the First International Conference on Communal Living; LCD. International Communes Desk; Tel Aviv, 1982). For more comprehensive descriptions of kibbutz educational principles and practice, see *Interchange*, 13 /1 (1982). The entire issue is devoted to kibbutz education. See also A. I. Rabin and B. Hazan (eds), *Collective Education in the Kibbutz* (New York: Springer, 1973).

to their kibbutz for a year or so, and then begin a period of international travel which may last for two or three years. Only then do they decide whether to join the kibbutz permanently.

2. Many of those who return to the kibbutz do not fully commit themselves; they do not accept positions of responsibility until their late twenties or early thirties.

3. Approximately fifty percent of kibbutz-born young men and women decide to leave kibbutz life.⁵

4. Six percent leave Israel and search for a way of life which is the very antithesis of their parents' Zionist and communal ideals.⁶ Seeing their sons and daughters emigrate from Israel is a traumatic experience for veteran kibbutz members.

"Utopists" react with extreme disappointment. They view the situation as a result of the failure of kibbutz education. Reality is not "what they had expected," is not "how it should be." "Realists" react in an equally one-sided manner: "This is our young people's choice. So let us recognize their right of free choice and get used to the changes they will decide to make in their mode of life." These opposing points of view are expressed by professional educators as well as by rank-and-file kibbutz members.

What should the criterion be by which success is measured? Is it "full commitment to the community?" There can be no doubt that without this the kibbutz cannot exist. Or shall we take as our criterion "educating people to be autonomous in their thinking, choosing and decision-making?" Without these, too, the kibbutz cannot exist. But then, naturally, a considerable number of young people may decide to adopt a different value system and leave the kibbutz.

I shall now examine three specific questions in kibbutz education that demonstrate the integrative, as opposed to the dichotomous, approach.

Self-Actualization

In the early days of the kibbutz, education was to a large extent "ideology-centered." Those were times when unlimited energy was invested in fulfilling the historical needs of the Jewish people for a

5. According to Menahem Rosner, an authority on kibbutz sociology, "There are considerable discrepancies among the various statistics concerning Kibbutz-attribution. It is now generally accepted that 50% of Kibbutz-born men and women leave the Kibbutz movement." (Private communication, April 1988.)

6. From an unpublished survey by D. Mittleberg (Institute for Research of the Kibbutz and the Cooperative Idea, University of Haifa, 1986).

homeland in Zion, in struggles with the harsh conditions of pioneering and returning to physical labour and to tilling the newly acquired land, in overcoming severe security problems which threatened the pioneers' very survival. No wonder that the Kibbutz geared the educational process to its physical and ideological survival needs. "Child-centered" education, stressing the unique individuality of every child and the many diverse ways to fulfill individual needs, was often considered a luxury. Education's explicit goal was "to educate committed kibbutz members."⁷

During the 1960's, when most kibbutzim had already grown into successful, flourishing communities, some young, second-generation intellectuals discovered Abraham Maslow's concept of "self-actualization" and applied it to kibbutz society. Maslow considered self-actualization as one of human beings' most fundamental needs. Provided that their more basic needs—physiological needs, and the need for security, belonging and appreciation—are fulfilled, they will strive for the fullest possible actualization of their inner individual potential.⁸

The ideology-centered leadership completely rejected this idea, which was perceived as a negation of basic kibbutz values. They claimed that the kibbutz's very existence depended on the principle that kibbutz society's needs—identified with general Jewish, Zionist and Israeli needs—must come first in any clash of interests between the individual and the community. They evaluated the striving for personal self-actualization as a destructive force, threatening the whole kibbutz value system.⁹

Self-actualization, however, was misunderstood not only by the leadership. Among the adherents of the new trend, there were also serious misunderstandings and exaggerations. There were indeed some who perceived self-actualization as legitimizing the discarding of all obligations to the community and to follow unhindered one's own private aspirations.

Both interpretations stress the incompatibility of self-actualization with social commitment. As so often happens, two diametrically opposed attitudes mutually reinforce each other, so that the real meaning of self-actualization became quite blurred. In his study of self-actualizing

7. According to Maria Folling-Albers, in her article "The Kibbutz as an Alternative Living Community and the Role of Education," *Communal Societies*, 5 (1985), 34-40: "The most important educational goal was to create a 'new type of man,' 'naturally' absorbing the values of the Kibbutz and 'naturally' growing into the community."

8. A. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1954.

9. The veteran leader of the Kibbutz-Artzi federation, Meir Ya'ari, entitled an article "Self Actualization or Continuing Our Mission" (*Al Hamishmar*, August 26, 1972). This dichotomous presentation of the problem clearly implies that self-actualization is incompatible with kibbutz values.

people, Maslow found that they had the following common characteristics:

- They are highly dedicated to some work, task, duty or vocation.
- They are clearly aware of what is right or wrong, good or bad; they consistently operate in accordance with their perception of right behavior.
- They are both selfish and unselfish; they find happiness in helping others in a way that is beneficial to themselves and to society.
- They are responsible because they believe that responsibility is rewarding.
- They have a deep feeling of kinship with the whole human race.
- They are highly idealistic; they are all involved in one of humanity's major causes, to which they devote much of their energy.¹⁰

Treating the issue of the individual's obligation to himself and to his community dichotomously is inconsistent with Maslow's ideas and research. What is more, in an open society, there can be no other way than searching for a constructive synthesis between the need for self-actualization of each individual and his intensive involvement in the community, leading to active participation in its endeavors, activities and leadership.

The self-actualization issue, as well as many others in kibbutz-education, are all aspects of the broad framework of integrating personal freedom with interpersonal responsibility. It is worth noting that this problem occupies thinkers all over the world, such as Yankelovich and Bellah in America, Marcovich in Yugoslavia and others.¹¹

Values Education

The second example deals with a problem which has become quite controversial: To what extent is it the educator's right—or even duty—to influence students in matters of values and beliefs?¹²

10. A. Maslow, "Self-Actualizing and Beyond" in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, (London: Penguin, 1971); F. Goble, *The Third Force*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1971).

11. Americans' disillusionment with the "ethic of self-fulfilment" as well as the birth of a new "ethic of commitment" are described in D. Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-fulfilment in a World Turned Upside Down*, (New York: Random House, 1981). In their analysis of American society, Bellah, et al describe people's search for individuation and separateness, coupled with a balanced commitment in family and community life. R.N. Bellah, R. Madison, W.M. Sullivan, A. Swidler and S.M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1985). The Yugoslavian philosopher Marcovich writes: "Self-actualization does not mean 'doing one's thing'; it means self-development and self-affirmation, which is responsible and concerned with the needs of other people." M. Marcovich, "Ethics and Social Development," (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, Unpublished Manuscript).

12. The dilemmas of values-education are dealt with in my article "Freedom and Commitment: Values-Issues in Humanistic Education," *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 26 (March 1988), 98-108.

The educator, like any other human being, is guided by his own personal value system. This applies not only to his private life but also to his educational principles and practices. In the kibbutz, students have close contact with their teacher. They meet the teacher not only within school confines but as kibbutz member, as parent of their peers, as part-time co-worker in one of the branches of production and indeed as participant in all aspects of social and cultural community life. Students can observe their teacher and gain vivid impressions of how his professed values find expression in day-to-day life. The relationship transcends the conventional student-teacher encounter. There can be no donning of professional masks on entering school in the morning and taking them off on leaving school in the afternoon.

In a setting such as this, the educator becomes extremely sensitive to the values-charged issues that arise in his day-to-day contact with his students. He may view values-education from two opposing points of view: as indoctrination and handing over traditional values from one generation to the next, or as facilitating students' free choice of values and their integration into a highly personal values-set.

The educator who rejects both values-indoctrination and values-neutrality has an especially difficult task. On the one hand, he brings to his educational encounter with youth—clearly and explicitly—his full personality, including his views, attitudes, values and ideals. On the other hand, he fully accepts his students' inalienable right to disagree with his values, reject them and to choose their own values system freely and independently. He is empathetic and accepting to them, even when they voice their "heresies."

If the educator wishes to be a behavioral model, he will attempt to express two values in his personal behavior: deep personal commitment to kibbutz society's value-system as well as no less deep empathy to others and their divergent views and values. He will have high ideals of Utopia as well as a profound respect for people for whom these ideals may be "too high" or otherwise unacceptable.

It must be added here that over the years kibbutz education has undergone some important changes. The early stage of "ideology-centeredness" has already been referred to. At a later stage, in the 60's and 70's, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme. A new generation of educators—most of them kibbutz-born young men and women—were doubly influenced: by humanistic educational thought stressing maximum individual freedom, and by a certain disillusionment and distrust of "total ideologies" or Utopias.¹³ Many of them refrained from

13. The Kibbutz-Artzi Federation's conference on "Youth Education" in 1982, dealt with this issue in some depth. Kadmi expressed the dilemma as follows: "Some of the graduates of our educational system tend to negate the necessity — even the morality — of ideological

dealing explicitly with ideological issues in their educational work. They preferred to adopt a position of neutrality. But, needless to say, there can be no vacuum in values education. The educator's decision to refrain from stressing specific values does not mean that students are now free to construct their own value-set independently, free from outside influences. It simply leaves them without a system for the analysis of values and beliefs from sources to be found on the street or in the media. The rejection of both extremes—indoctrination and neutrality—cannot but lead kibbutz educators to a continuous striving for approaches based on synthesis and integration.

Relations with Non-kibbutz Society

The third example extends beyond the kibbutz's confines. In recent years, social and political changes in Israel have caused considerable alienation of Israeli society from the ideals of the kibbutz movement, which accounts for 3.5% of the total Jewish population of Israel. In 1948, the year of the State of Israel's establishment, the corresponding figure was 7.2%.¹⁴ Kibbutz-values, such as equality, collectivity and social commitment, productive work, socialism and pioneering¹⁵—values that in the early days of Jewish settlement in Palestine inspired wide sections of the population—have become relatively unattractive.

The sources of this estrangement are manifold. The mass immigration, flowing into Israel during the years immediately following the state's establishment, was not kibbutz-oriented. Most of the immigrants came from Middle Eastern communities, which had hardly been touched by the pioneering Zionist youth movements that were the main source of new kibbutz-candidates in pre-Holocaust Europe. Under the influence of western culture, and of the "American way of life" in particular, pioneering ideals gave way to individualistic trends in Israel society as

education. They accuse us of 'having lied to them.' 'Reality/ they say, 'is so very different from what you taught us. Zionism is not as humane, Socialism is not as just as you have claimed! The Kibbutz's ideals of equality are not being realized in day-to-day life!' This accusation, exaggerated as it may be, expresses a deep disillusionment. But the alternative — educational individualism—has fared no better. It has caused equally serious disillusionment. And my conclusion: 'Let us educate towards value-goals, with which the individual can identify. This will enable him to develop his inner potential and to seek actualization of his free personality in the framework of service to society and to social ideals.' " Y. Kadmi, "Ideological Education: a Reassessment," *Hachinuch Hameshutaf*, 104 (May 1982), 11-23 (in Hebrew).

14. *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, (Jerusalem: Central Bureau of Statistics, 1987).

15. See also, Dov Darom, "Value-Changes in Kibbutz Society," *The Kibbutz*, 9-10(1983-84), 214-238 (in Hebrew). A condensed version of this article appeared in English in *Shdemot*, 27(1986), 110-120.

a whole. The right-wing "Likud-bloc, which gained more and more political influence during the 1970's and actually assumed power in 1977, continuously attacked the kibbutz movement, which had always been a prominent part of the rival Labour-alignment's leadership.¹⁶

This alienation is in danger of becoming mutual. Some time ago, a young man wrote in a kibbutz's bulletin: "Whenever I step outside the Kibbutz, I feel like a stranger—a stranger in my own country."¹⁷ This is someone who identifies so much with kibbutz values that he finds extreme difficulty in mixing and empathizing with those whose views and values are different. In this case, the socialization process has evidently been "successful"—but a new and serious problem arises. Kibbutz ideology has always stressed the closest possible interaction between the kibbutz and Israeli society as a whole. The kibbutz movement has been an integral part of the country's social, political, cultural and economic leadership. A process of estrangement—of the Kibbutz becoming a closed sect—is contradictory to the very core of the kibbutz's value system. In this case, the gap between utopist and realist perspectives seems very wide indeed; only the future will show to what extent it is bridgeable.

Here, then, is another pair of opposing values—personal identification with kibbutz ideals and solidarity with Israeli society in general. The integration of these two opposites is a major challenge to kibbutz educators, a challenge that has so far not been dealt with successfully.

Conclusion

It seems dysfunctional to treat Utopian aspirations and non-utopian reality as ever-clashing opposites. It is highly doubtful whether Utopian ideals can contribute to mankind's welfare, spiritual as well as material, unless they are closely coupled with respect for flesh-and-blood human beings, who do not always live up to them. As soon as the "good place" is so far removed from reality that it becomes "no place," we are faced with a situation which is educationally harmful.

16. This issue has been dealt with in great detail elsewhere. "The realization of their (the Kibbutzim's) importance in the Labour Alignment's political effort led the anti-Labour Likud-Bloc to attempt to delegitimise them and to present them as 'arrogant millionaires/with no common language with the real working class. (The phrase was used by the Likud-leader, Menahem Begin, in a T.V. broadcast in 1981)." H. Near, "Paths to Utopia: the Kibbutz as a Movement for Social Change," *Jewish Social Studies*, 48 (3-4) (1986), 189-203. Public-opinion surveys indicate that between 1978 and 1981, the "degree of sympathy towards the kibbutz" in the non-kibbutz population fell from 59% to 40% in the 18-22 age-group, and from 59% to 44% among city and development-town dwellers. U. Leviatan, "The Kibbutz in the Eyes of the Israeli Public (1976-1981)," *The Kibbutz*, 8 (1981 / 2), 235-256 (in Hebrew).

17. David Netzer, "To be a Stranger," *Yasuriton* (monthly bulletin of Kibbutz Yasur), Sept. 1982, 3-4 (in Hebrew).

On the other hand, stressing the integrative approach to this problem is almost like taking off to a new Utopia. Despite all the trials and tribulations to which Utopian aspirations have led the kibbutz, there is no way of doing without them. The tension between lofty ideals and human reality—the constant search for integration—will probably continue to be the essence of Kibbutz life.