

# Socialism's Last Stand

By Joshua Muravchik

*Commentary*

March 1, 2002

About a year ago, kibbutz Mishmar David in central Israel voted, 50 to 1, to dissolve. Deeply in debt (like most kibbutzim), it decided to sell off some land to settle its obligations and then to give each member tide to his own dwelling and a share in the kibbutz's factory. This, noted the *Jerusalem Post*, made Mishmar David "a pioneer among kibbutzim," the first to dismantle itself in order to become "an ordinary Israeli community."

A pioneer it may have been, but most of Israel's roughly 270 kibbutzim are headed down the same path. "The condition of the kibbutz" as we have known it, writes the Israeli author Daniel Gavron in a sympathetic study, is "terminal." In turn, this collapse also tells much about the condition of the two projects of which the kibbutz was the flower: Zionism and socialism. Once the very symbol of Israel, the kibbutzim, collective settlements devoted chiefly to agriculture, drew thousands of international volunteers willing to work without pay and live in sheds in order to experience the world's one example of true socialism. For here was an enterprise operating faithfully according to the rule "from each according to his ability; to each according to his needs," a precept made famous by Marx himself (though it was first coined by Marx's mentor, Moses Hess, today remembered better for his later Zionism than for his earlier socialism). Moreover, in contrast to other socialist enterprises, the kibbutz stood out, in the words of the great religious philosopher Martin Buber, as "an experiment that did not fail."

The failures Buber had in mind included not only the vast grotesqueries erected by Lenin and his epigones but earlier attempts to organize voluntary socialist colonies on a small scale. A few hundred of such colonies were founded during the course of the 19th century, most of them in the United States. Of these, the most important were sponsored by the followers of the Welshman Robert Owen, who in 1825 gathered nearly a thousand followers at New Harmony, Indiana, a then-flourishing settlement of farms and industries that he purchased on the banks of the Wabash River. Within a scant few months after Owen's group took possession, however, a visitor would write:

The comfortable gardens, and vines which used to spread and twine about the older habitations, [have] generally gone to ruin. The gardens mostly full of weeds (not full of useful vegetables as formerly) and in many instances the fences broken down and completely open to the streets--a general carelessness seems to prevail; I have seen cows and hogs grazing in some of the gardens and grounds. No wonder, then, that history has followed Marx and Engels in dismissing Owen and others of his ilk as "utopian."

The founders of the kibbutz movement were of a very different type. They may have been dreamers, but they were all too aware of being up against a forbidding natural and human environment that demanded the full measure of their energy and practicality. Nor were they misfits escaping from society, the charge by which some explained away the failures of Owen's experiments. On the contrary, they were the spearhead of the Jewish community in Palestine, instrumental to the birth and flourishing of the state of Israel. No fewer than five future prime ministers--David Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak--came from kibbutzim.

During the pre-state decades in which Jews struggled to lay physical claim to lands to which title had been purchased, it was these settlements that formed the furthest, most isolated, and perilous outposts. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the kibbutzim, which comprised a mere 3 percent of the population (or about 130,000 people), provided an estimated 20 percent of Israel's top military officers. They also produced a great part of the nation's agricultural goods and later a disproportionate share of its industrial output.

They did this while practicing socialism of a very pure kind. The members rotated jobs, took their meals in a common dining hall, lived in identical little dwellings, and deposited their offspring in children's homes while they were still in swaddling clothes. The youngsters lived and studied with their peers, save for a few hours' visit with parents each evening.

The goal was to go beyond mathematical equality to "human equality," taking into account discrepancies in biological, familial, and other circumstances. Committees were formed to weigh special requests, and were in turn answerable to a general assembly, usually held weekly, in which every member was eligible to participate. Everything was thoroughly democratic.

The kibbutz I know best is Ginosar, and it was typical. It was founded in 1937 in the narrow valley from which it takes its name on the northwestern banks of the Sea of Galilee, or Lake Kinneret in Hebrew. This is a venue memorable to Christians for the miracle of the loaves and fishes and other highlights of Jesus' ministry, and to Jews for heroic resistance to Roman rule. The kibbutz lies in the shadow of Mount Arbel, on whose apex, a flat rocky cliff, the Jews built a fortress that for a time confounded Roman military engineers, much like the more famous fortress at Massada on the Dead Sea. Below, on Kinneret itself, the historian Josephus informs us that the desperate Jews took to fishing boats in a hopeless confrontation with Roman warships.

I have known Ginosar since 1960 when my grandmother took me there to visit our distant relative Judith and her family. In 1972 I returned to Israel as the leader of a delegation of young American socialists invited by our Israeli counterparts. By chance, the model kibbutz to which they took us was Ginosar. I have returned to it periodically, including in 2001, when I found it in the throes of wrenching changes about which I interviewed a number of the older members.

Judith and most of the other original settlers had met as teenagers at Tel Aviv's A. D. Gordon School, named after the Zionist prophet (1856-1922) of the "religion of labor." Gordon's philosophy embodied the belief that Jews could reclaim their ancestral home not merely by purchasing land but by mixing their sweat with it, thus also reversing the national deformation that was the consequence of centuries of exclusion from many manly vocations in the Diaspora. Gordon's thinking also reflected the influence of Marxism, strong among the secularized Jews who made up the larger part of the Zionist movement; in this view, it was not the Jews who were the "chosen people" but the proletariat, and Jews stood in unique danger of missing out on membership in this elect group because they numbered too many intellectuals and too few workers.

Upon graduation in the early 1930's, one or two dozen Gordon School adolescents pledged to stick together to redeem their own patch of the Palestinian wilderness for the Jewish nation. Their ranks were augmented by occasional recruits. One of them, Avshalom, who became Judith's husband, had made his way to Palestine at age fourteen after being expelled from his yeshiva in Lithuania because he preferred the soccer field to the synagogue. Through such accretions and the birth of five babies, the group's numbers passed thirty. They encamped in 1934 in the village of Migdal, overlooking the Ginosar valley, to await assignment to a piece of land by the Jewish Agency while eking out a meager living as farm hands.

Impatient with the wait, the recruits cast a covetous eye on the valley below. It had been purchased by Baron Rothschild, who had created his own Zionist corporation to buy land for individual Jewish homesites. When a bloody Arab uprising broke out in 1936, threatening to cut the vulnerable road that connected Tiberias at the southern end of the Kinneret with Sefat twenty kilometers north, the Haganah, the Jewish defense force, helped the young Gordon School graduates to move into the valley "temporarily" to protect the route.

In the manner of the period, the colonists erected tents for dwellings, their only permanent structure being a stockade and watchtower. Apart from self-defense, they devoted themselves to clearing the land, which would yield nothing until they carted off a myriad of heavy stones and hacked their way through the dense spiny branches of hundreds of sheizaf (jujube) trees to dig up their deep, interwoven roots. Their only immediate source of livelihood was from fishing, but since the return was not nearly enough to support them, a large share of the men took temporary jobs

outside the colony.

The Arab uprising ended in 1939, but the youngsters had no intention of leaving, even though their illegitimate status deterred Zionist authorities from giving them any material assistance. It was in a eucalyptus forest at Ginosar that, with the coming of the world war, the Haganah created the Palmach, an elite commando force led by a member of the kibbutz named Yigal Allon that cut its teeth assisting the Allies in the invasion of Syria and Lebanon. In Israel's 1948 war of independence, Allon, by then the commander of a much-expanded Palmach, was regarded by many as the country's most important military leader.

Ginosar lost three men in the 1948 war, but with the achievement of statehood and relative security the kibbutz grew and began to prosper. New manpower arrived in the form of refugees from the Holocaust. The painstakingly cleared soil proved highly fertile, and there was more of it as the kibbutz absorbed land from which Arabs had fled. Moved by Allon's stature as a national hero, Rothschild's corporation relented and ceded to the squatters; Ginosar at last began to appear on maps and became eligible for loans and other benefits from the new state's sympathetic Labor government. Members were able to quit their outside jobs, food in the dining hall became plentiful, tents gave way to cottages. In 1952, running water was installed in the dwellings--though only in bathrooms, for introducing it into a kitchen area would have detracted from the practice of communal dining.

This is not to say that life was luxurious. After a morning in the fields or banana groves, kibbutzniks would pour water over the concrete floors of their cottages before going for their midday dinner. The evaporation provided a kind of makeshift air conditioning as they passed the hottest hours of the day in siesta before emerging for afternoon shifts.

The kibbutz cultivated bananas, cotton, grapes, citrus, olives, palms, mangos, avocados, corn, alfalfa, soybeans, and garden vegetables. It raised chickens, fish, dairy cattle, and honeybees. It cooperated in fishing with kibbutz Ein Gev, located on the eastern banks of the lake at the foot of the Golan Heights from whose redoubts Syrian gunmen shelled the fields. They fished by night, gathering tons of St. Peter's fish and a small fish called lavnun or Tiberias sardines that were canned in a plant operated jointly by the two kibbutzim.

In the 1960's and 1970's, the children of Ginosar's original settlers reached maturity. Some received advanced agricultural training, and the innovations they introduced further advanced Ginosar's prosperity. The cottages were improved, as were the houses where the children lived. Each member began to receive a modest cash allocation for clothing, furniture, and travel. Cultural and recreational facilities were added. A Holocaust memorial was erected in the kibbutz cemetery.

This period also saw the kibbutz diversify its economy beyond farming and fishing. The reason was not strictly economic, for Ginosar's agricultural sector was booming; but the kibbutzniks had discovered that a worker's productivity in the valley's harsh heat diminished notably after the age of forty. In view of the strong ethos of productive labor, it was important to find employment for aging members. (Increases in productivity also meant that fewer hands were now required to work the land.) A small plastics factory was opened, later transformed to produce electrical switches and then medical appliances. In the meantime, taking advantage of Ginosar's picturesque location on the shores of the lake, the kibbutz opened Nof Ginosar, or Ginosar View, a guesthouse and restaurant. When a wooden boat found by two of Ginosar's fishermen in the mud of the lakeshore turned out to be 2,000 years old, it was made the centerpiece of a little museum. Kibbutz publicists advertised that it might have been used by Jesus himself.

The golden age of Ginosar and the other kibbutzim lasted into the 1980's; but there was turbulence beneath the surface. In 1977, the election of Menachem Begin as Israel's prime minister ended a stretch of political rule by Labor and the Left that had extended back beyond the birth of the state. Out went a policy of generosity to the kibbutzim, including subsidies, tax breaks, and government contracts.

The change was psychological as well as financial. Begin's constituency was made up heavily of Sephardi Jews, many of them formerly from Arab countries, who were poorer and much less favorably inclined toward socialism than the European-born Ashkenazis who had dominated Israel in its early years. Most Sephardis shunned the kibbutzim, and for Begin it was good politics to direct barbed comments at these "millionaires with swimming pools," as he called kibbutzniks. The characterization came as a shock to people who were used to regarding themselves as a "serving elite," in the phrase of the political theorist Shlomo Avineri.

Ruder shocks were in store. As the 80's turned into the 90's, inflation in Israel reached 400 or 500 percent. When interest rates failed to keep pace, the inducement to borrow became overwhelming. To apply for a loan at even 100 or 200 percent interest was like receiving free money, a temptation that most kibbutzim, like many individual Israeli citizens and companies, could not resist. When the government finally took drastic measures to halt the inflationary spiral, the kibbutzim were unable to meet their payments: the principal amounted to \$30,000 for each kibbutznik, a burden 30 times the size of Mexico's per-capita debt.

In truth, however, it was not the financial crisis that destroyed the movement: the government engineered a series of bailout agreements in 1989, 1996, and 1999, with the banks writing off hundreds of millions of dollars of debt, the government covering some, and the rest being rescheduled. The debt crisis was a symptom of something deeper. Most of the borrowing, instead of being used as capital to boost earnings, had been spent to raise the standard of living. Tellingly, the impulse was not so much hedonism as an effort to stem the loss of members: by some point in the 1970's, the majority of kibbutz-raised children were leaving.

The high rate of desertion reflected what Yaacov Oved, a kibbutznik and a scholar of communes, calls "the problem of the third generation." Typically, Oved notes, the founders of communes are individuals burning with enthusiasm. Their children "maintain some of their spirit," but the next generation "is always the problematic one." He adduces the American example of Amana, the German Protestant sect that settled in Iowa in the 1800's to live a communal life. Its seven colonies prospered by producing household appliances--Amana is a name that continues to grace American kitchens--but in the 1930's, when the grandchildren came to dominate the community, they rebelled against the system, breaking the church's commercial assets into shares and dividing them among the members.

The idea that a similar process would unfold in the kibbutzim was unthinkable to the founders, who expected just the opposite. They themselves had had to struggle to surmount their bourgeois upbringings; but they believed, as one of them recalled, that "our children who are being raised in the ethos of the kibbutz would be the best kibbutzniks." They were certain, in short, that the kibbutzim would become the site of history's most successful effort to achieve socialism's perennial goal of a new man. It was for this very purpose, after all, that children were being raised from infancy in a brotherly and nurturing environment, and that they lived together in children's homes rather than with their parents.

Yet the results disappointed. Despite the "absolute control" that the kibbutz, in Daniel Gavron's words, exercised over its members, those who grew up in these "optimal conditions" often failed to become imbued with its values, and the very first rampart to fall was communal childrearing. As soon as the exigencies of poverty and communal defense no longer operated to reinforce the decision to lodge kibbutz offspring collectively, a cry was raised for children to sleep in their parents' homes.

In many cases it is unclear how this demand gathered such force. Undoubtedly, young mothers had much to do with it; at Ginosar, I was told, women who had married into the kibbutz took the lead, although I doubt that they alone would have been enough to compel such a big change. Compounding the mystery, most kibbutz-raised adults would speak warmly of their own communal upbringing while indicating that they did not want their children raised in the same fashion. Did their parental instincts overwhelm fond memories? Or was there a darker side to communal rearing that was unacknowledged or unrecalled?

Certainly, not all had been happy in that system. One of my Ginosar cousins recalls from kindergarten age begging her parents to move to the city so the family could live together and she could follow her own interests rather than having to conform to those of her peers. That such feelings were shared is attested by two books published in Israel in 1991. One was a collection of searing reminiscences of the children's houses gathered by Nurit Leshem, a kibbutz-raised psychologist. The other was a novel, *Murder on a Kibbutz*, by Israel's popular mystery writer Batya Gur.

Though she writes fiction, Gur is prized for her realistic portraits of Israeli life. In this novel, the central character, a middle-aged leader of a kibbutz and the son of two of its founders, explodes at a community meeting:

I remember vividly how [my father] used to take me back to the children's house when I ran away to their room at night. . . . I'm not saying there wasn't anything good about the way we grew up, but what about the misery, the nights when we woke up to a nonmother instead of a mother and a nonfather instead of a father? . . . I want to tuck in my children at night myself . . . and when they have a nightmare I want them to come to my bed, not to some intercom, and not to make them go out at night in the dark looking for our room, stumbling over stones, thinking that every shadow is a monster, and in the end standing in front of a closed door or being dragged back to the children's house.

A number of kibbutzim made the shift to family sleeping in the 1970's. Ginosar did it in the late 1980's. The last holdout, kibbutz Baram on the border with Lebanon, succumbed in the mid-1990's. One of the resisters complained: "The abortion of the old system in all the other kibbutzim . . . is eventually leading to the disintegration of the kibbutz." His fears may have seemed overblown--how could something as tangential to the economic system of the kibbutz as children's living arrangements have such a powerful impact?--but they were not.

As a practical matter, the change required enlarging each residential unit to add more bedrooms. This massive construction project was one reason for the heavy borrowing that wreaked havoc with the kibbutzim's books. But a more subtle factor was also at work. Moving children in with their parents "led to the privatizing of many things," Shlomo Avineri notes. "It was an across-the-board reorganization of public and private space."

One sign of this transformation was a new mode of dining. The eating hall, which had drawn the community together three times a day, had been the backbone of the traditional kibbutz. Now, with increasing frequency, meals were being prepared at home. (Like most other kibbutzim, Ginosar opened its own small supermarket.) Together with the new sleeping arrangements, the new eating habits encouraged an efflorescence of individualism.

Of course, from its earliest days the kibbutz had had to negotiate an endless chain of compromises between the stringent communistic ideals of its founders and the germ of egoism that they could never fully eradicate. At Ginosar as elsewhere, the early kibbutzniks had decided to forswear even their own clothing. Garments were handed in to the central laundry each week, and clean ones of the appropriate size (more or less) were received in exchange. After a couple of years, the women could stand this no longer, and the kibbutz made its first bow to private property.

Typically, a second bow would occur at a kibbutz when the men who had volunteered for the British army in World War II returned with electric teakettles or some other small furnishing. The kibbutz could not force members to relinquish such prizes, but they introduced an intolerable element of inequality. The solution? Buy a kettle for each household--the first small step in the eventual undermining of communal dining. In subsequent cycles, each member was furnished with a refrigerator, then a television.

Even when clothes were individually owned, they were usually purchased in bulk by the kibbutzim--at first. But in time members asserted the wish to select their own, and so was born a system of cash allowances, eventually extended to household furnishings, toiletries, and travel. A further

transition came in the 1980's when most kibbutzim voted to combine these separate allocations into "inclusive budgets" that members could use as they wished.

If the shoots of individual identity and self-interest had always managed to force their way through the kibbutz's edifice of selfless collectivism, the financial crisis of the 1980's exacerbated this erosion to the crumbling point by undermining the members' sense of security. The kibbutzim were facing insolvency, and despite the government-arranged bailouts, kibbutzniks well knew that the nation no longer relied on them to settle the land and guard the borders. How long would it continue to underwrite them? The question haunted especially those at the end of their working years. Because they had never imagined reaching such a pass, no pensions had been put aside. It was assumed that the kibbutz would always be there, and that it would provide.

Although the elderly were the most vulnerable, the sense of insecurity was felt by all. It became common for people with private income--pensions from outside jobs, gifts from family members off the kibbutz, or reparations to Holocaust survivors from the German government--to deposit it in personal bank accounts rather than contributing it to the collective, as the rules required. Once again, such selfish behavior was not entirely new. Every kibbutz had slackers--it was "paradise for parasites," quipped one Ginosar veteran. Still, although these problems "were there all along" (in the words of one of my cousins, who left Ginosar in his forties), "the pride people took in being kibbutzniks enabled them to tolerate it." With the days of pioneering long past, that feeling is there no longer.

Their new-felt insecurity led kibbutzniks to confront some economic realities that had once seemed of secondary importance. By the late 20th century, agriculture alone could no longer ensure a standard of living that most Israelis, including kibbutzniks, had come to desire. "We wanted to make a modest life," Moshe, an old Ginosar fisherman, told me wistfully. "The children today don't even want to hear the word 'modest.'" Diversifying from agriculture to production and service industries, as Ginosar did with its factories and guesthouse, boosted revenues, but much about the economy of the traditional kibbutz was in fact uneconomic.

Socialists used to decry "production for profit, rather than need," but production that is not for profit is usually unprofitable, entailing costs that someone must bear. At Ginosar, as at other kibbutzim, many economic decisions were driven by the desire to give members suitable or satisfying jobs, even if this entailed an implicit subsidy. Job rotation, a totem of the movement's egalitarian ethic, undermined efficiency. And even where it was circumvented to keep talented managers in place, the closely knit social structure militated against sound practice. How do you fire or demote your neighbor?

Today, a couple of Ginosar's ablest administrators, including one of Avshalom and Judith's sons, manage other kibbutzim while continuing to live at Ginosar. Meanwhile, Ginosar has hired a nonmember as its manager. "We bring in outside experts and professionals," one kibbutznik told me pointedly, "because they have relations with no one."

But effective management is only one element in a productive enterprise. It has been said that the kibbutz is a great place for children and the elderly, but not for those of working age. The fact is that those who leave the kibbutzim are often the ones who are most economically productive; by the same token, people who can make a good living on the outside are the ones most likely to chafe under the kibbutz's traditional egalitarianism. This continuing problem has spurred the most far-reaching departures from socialist principle.

At Ginosar, a proposal to pay extra for overtime was initially considered too controversial because it violated the principle of "to each according to his needs." But by 1997 some kibbutzim had adopted an even more radical step: assigning wages according to skill level. The first to do this, Ein Zivan in the Golan, was threatened with expulsion from the kibbutz movement in 1993; today many others have followed its example. In addition, kibbutzniks are free to find jobs outside the kibbutz, as about a fourth of Ginosar's working members do, keeping their wages after paying a tax to the kibbutz, while outsiders fill some jobs on the kibbutz itself. These days, Thai immigrants

work in Ginosar's fields, and Arabs clean the hotel guestrooms and serve the meals.

Ginosar has shifted entirely to a cash economy. With their after-tax earnings, members pay not only for food and electricity but for all the goods and services they receive, even education. Only some property maintenance, basic medical coverage, and landscaping of the common areas come "free." And at Ginosar, as at other kibbutzim, discussion is under way about allowing members to take ownership of their dwellings. Like many others, Ginosar is also planning to build housing for sale to the public, hoping to attract suburbanites to whom the kibbutz would also sell various services, like education and dependent care. Finally, in addition to establishing ownership of dwellings, kibbutzim are discussing privatizing their productive assets by distributing shares to members.

Henry Near, author of a standard history of the movement, sums it all up as follows:

During most of the history of the kibbutz movement, social change was justified (or resisted) on grounds which stemmed from, or were compatible with, a socialist worldview. From about 1980 onward, however, the ideological background changed. . . . The improvisations were still ideologized, but the ideology was no longer that of socialism, but of late-20th-century capitalism.

A former head of the kibbutz movement and an opponent of the new trends named Muki Tsur has described the same development bitterly and mockingly: "Some of the most romantic images of capitalism in the world can be found today on the kibbutzim."

Some 40 out of Israel's 270 kibbutzim have formed a group called the "collective trend" to resist the abandonment of socialism. But this is little more than a rearguard action, for these 40 differ from the majority only in the pace, not the direction, of change. With the passing of the heroic pioneering phase of Israel's development, the communal way of life has proved unsustainable. As one member who sweated to support Ginosar by mining potash from the Dead Sea told me: "Now I think the system is a mistake because not all people will give their best if they can get things free." Another says simply: "We were abnormal."

Nothing can ever wipe away the extraordinary part played by the kibbutzim in the establishment and flourishing of Israel. But why did such glowing success end in such failure? A hint can be found by going back to Robert Owen. The collectives that he and other 19th-century visionaries launched in America were of two kinds. Some, like New Harmony, were created for the explicit purpose of practicing socialism. They were abysmal failures, collapsing after a median span of two years. Others, by contrast, were religious communes, in which shared property was ancillary to a binding faith; these latter endured, on average, ten times longer.

Most kibbutzim were secular. The small fraction that were religiously based are holding up better than the rest, although Gavron argues that they, too, are following the trend led by Mishmar David. But for the kibbutz movement as a whole, what served as the functional equivalent of a religious faith was the burning commitment to Zionism. Members were joined to their fellows in a project of redemption that made everything else endurable. So powerful a motive was this that they not only helped build a country but also for a time gave the world its only example of socialism lived, or so it seemed, according to the original blueprint.

But the kibbutzim could not survive the success of the Zionist enterprise of "normalizing" the Jewish people. The more normal the Jewish state became, the less willing its citizens were to practice socialism, with its hopeless economic model and its fundamental misreading of human nature. Whether Israel itself can survive normalization, in a world still stubbornly unreconciled to its existence, is another and much more consequential question.

*Joshua Muravchik is a resident scholar at AEI. This article is adapted from his new book, Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism, forthcoming from Encounter Books.*