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Reducing Collectivity in a Kibbutz

by

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Abstract

This article deals with one specific kibbutz whose location in central Israel exposes it to the atmosphere of capitalism and individualism, prevailing in adjacent urban centers. I began an anthropological study of kibbutz “Gimmel­Resh” (alias) during the second half of the 1960s, observing it during a successful transition from a purely agricultural to an agro-industrial-based economy. By the 1970s it was known for being highly industrialized, as well as prosperous (Kressel, 1974; 1983). I resumed my observations at Gimmel­Resh in Autumn 1987, as it was facing severe economic crisis. As of now, the kibbutz is deep in debt. It faces the dilemma whether to close down some of its industrial plants due to lack of manpower, thus foregoing income and incurring further debts, or to force members to work wherever required in the kibbutz. This however goes contrary to the emerging trend of letting the members decide upon their vocation and choose their place of work. My article relates the story of the two conflicting vogues.

Why change?

The rural sector of Israel is moving towards decollectivization. This trend is not an economic necessity nor a dictate of ecological constraints; rather it falls in the realm of Zeitgeist. Believers in the viability of cooperatives must now justify their trust in the “impossible”. To explain the circumstances of the period during which kibbutzim and moshavim were founded even to their own children, let alone to those unfamiliar with Jewish history, is nearly impossible. These people now offer pathetic apologies for being so “stupid” as to believe in socialism, hence succumb to the dictates of their General Assembly and employment by the collective’s needs. New opportunities of work and of occupational careers, that have evolved during the last decades, that were disregarded in the kibbutzim – now reach the members. Some

1This paper was first delivered at the International Conference on Theoretical and Applied Aspects of Labor-Managed Firms in Bar-Ilan University in May 1992.
2On the ideological problems of our time, regarding the motivating powers in the modern economy, see Aron 1967: Part 1.
3On the problem posited by the ramification of occupational groups and the individual’s choice at work see Caplow, 1954.
attribute their "folly" to youthful naivety; others blame politicians and teachers who misled them. In addition to their declining standard of living, they have to endure a gleeful "I told you so." (Kressel, 1989). Therefore, believers in the socialist system tend to adhere to the tenets of the kibbutz, since "there is basically no scientific proof of them being wrong," but understand that readjustments are required. The acme of performance for the skilled worker at the rural branch and the industrial plant alike, are often incongruous with the kibbutz requirements. Also, the meaning of "work" has been transmuted and the accent is no longer placed on the manual and blue-collar, as it used to be. Ambitious and capable kibbutz members learn from the past and look to the future, seek for tracks that lead away from the field and out of the workshop.

How to change?

When decollectivization reaches the moshav, where farms have always belonged to individual families, the following usually takes place: 1) spending of community saving, as well as private use of public areas and equipment until every piece of property that was cooperatively owned, is either sold or passed on to private individuals; and 2) withdrawal from mutual guarantee agreements, which had required members to share debts. A new motto, recorded throughout the moshav settlements is now: "mind as a rule your own business", *i.e.*, diminish the attention, previously given to communal concerns.

In the kibbutz, where every item of real estate is communally-owned and the division of the public domain into individually-owned possessions is impractical, privatization usually takes the form of "filching" work hours from the required quota. In addition, there is a reluctance to respond to labor requirements of the public enterprise. People prefer to work in "self-fulfilling jobs". At first, jobs as these were sought within the kibbutz, but as a consequence of the inclination to open its work places to hired labor, the intra-kibbutz scene of competing through achievement has been disrupted. Today, highly skilled members prefer employment outside its boundaries, hence proving diligence by the receipts they get from their capitalist employers.

Although members who work outside the kibbutz have to give their earnings to the kibbutz (except living and travel expenses), they benefit from such work in several ways: 1) having greater leeway with the time that they spend ostensibly

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4 On the anthropological perspectives of "work" and its meaning in different cultural settings see Wallman, 1979.
5 For a fine case history as to the way modern technology challenges workers of the industries connected with agriculture, see Frazer, 1965:219ff. Competition over outstanding achievement in Israel in the 1990s does not effect the workplace as it has in the past. Cf. Kressel, 1995:156.
6 See Schwartz, 1995: Ch. 1
7 Notified mainly by the spread of hired labor. See Helman, 1985.
Reducing Collectivity in a Kibbutz

2) receiving living expenses, free access to automobiles and other fringe benefits from their employer, gives them advantages over their kibbutz comrades, especially in the manipulation of savings; 3) the acquisition of a trade or profession increases the likelihood that one will not have to work at manual labor or boring jobs at home; 4) the network of connections at the workplace enhances advancement in a career and improves the chances for finding a job, if one decides to leave the kibbutz; 5) savings, qualifications and connections increase the member's negotiating power vis-à-vis the kibbutz institutions with regard to better positions or terms of employment at home; 6) once working outside becomes the norm, as well as the track for achievement and recognition for ambitious people 20–30 years of age, work and achievement within the kibbutz will become stigmatized.

The cost to the community

When it becomes the right of every member of the kibbutz to select his/her vocation, no authority can compel him/her to perform unwanted jobs – there is no way to mandate sharing of burdensome work. This weakens the intrinsic obligations of each member to the collective. In addition, the need to maximize productive capacity requires an increase in kibbutz enterprises and manpower, which outstrips the ability of the kibbutz to provide member manpower, even if it all worked at home. This hastens disintegration of the socialist ideology by paving the way for an increase in hired labor (against the original kibbutz tenets). Capitalist opportunities (and challenges) now become the prime mover in determining the further development of jobs. Once the regulation against hiring outside workers had been disregarded, it became even easier for members to gain permission to work in the outside job market.

As long as cash flow was stable and facilitated the employment of hired labor, kibbutz members could pursue their own self-interest in choice of vocation. However, beginning in late 1985, the supply of ready cash dried up. The lack of reserves restricted the hiring of outside workers, and this, in turn, threatened the public enterprise with total collapse. The members of the kibbutz were now needed to fill the labor requirements of its factories and agriculture. The calculation had to be made as to whether the total input of salaries from members working outside would yield enough funds to compensate for loss of income due to shut-down factories and non-exploited agricultural potential. Even when this is not the case, members continue to work outside. As time passes and the kibbutz grows poorer, belief in its common future dwindles, and requests to leave increase. Thus the society and its enterprises enter a turbulent state, and disintegrates.

The members are “cutting their own throats”, since they can plainly see that they are losing their main sources of income as the kibbutz economic branches close one after the other; nevertheless, the ambitious and most mobile (aged 25–40) now feel
that they are unable to make concessions in the interests of the public good. This is either because they are tied to their jobs in a way that does not allow concessions and voluntary gestures, or because they cannot regain trust in the old system (in which all were willing to work for the general good). Career-minded members, therefore, channel their energy into ways of earning more – conspicuously, albeit in doing so, in total sum, they earn less. That is, jointly with the community, by prudent use of the property it owns, they may amass more, but alas, that might not spotlight their individual aptitude.

Typically, the young age groups reach the conclusion that the idea of working for the sake of the group is contrary to common human tendencies such as egotism. At this stage, their parents accept that it is just about too late to vitalize socialist thinking, after such neglect. An opinion now heard is; “Each one of the systems (capital-individualism or social cooperativism) could suit Gimmel-Resh as long as it is implemented with integrity, however, the two cannot coexist, because the instinct of greed outstrips the ideal of communality.”

Whose job is it? Or, who is a work hero?

Part of the community (mostly the older kibbutz members) bemoan the fact that the new generation does not value the joy of working for the common good, when the reward for the hard-working and capable is the gratitude of the group. A few even work harder, putting in extra hours, as though to attract the youngsters’ attention to elicit emulation. Others tease and criticize the younger generation. The following section – which depicts a chaotic social reality, the corollary of egotism – was copied from somewhere into Dapim (No. 1460 March 1988), the bi-weekly journal of the kibbutz:

This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody. There was an important job to be done. Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everybody’s job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn’t do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.

In contrast to the image of the shirker, as a matter a necromancy, the older members invoke the long-forgotten image of Stakhanov, Stalin’s “work hero”. Parlor discussions pertaining to questions of what and who is a work hero analyze and negate the moralism that was exemplified by Alexei Grigorievitch Stakhanov, the coal miner from Donbass. Rumors have it that he had a bitter end, which he deserved, for breaking the norms and quotas of work, thereby earning for himself a reward at the cost of imposing an excessive work rhythm on his colleagues, for which they were not compensated. In any comparison, Gimmel-Resh work heroes, elders at the age of 60+ (whose heroic saga has been proved only in the trial of years and perseverance) come out glorious, and thus outstrip Stakhanov.
"A year of economic autonomy"

A year of vacation or "a year off" (like "a day off", etc.) is an established tradition in the kibbutzim. It was at first used to give the members a leave of absence to settle unfinished personal affairs, perhaps help old parents living in town, or to enable a member to find a spouse, etc. Members would return home afterwards and resume the normal routine on the kibbutz.8

Holding a "job outside" is another well-established tradition allowing members the opportunity to work in their kibbutz movement or political party, to serve permanently in the armed forces, to engage in salaried work as an outlet in cases of discontentment with the local job opportunities, or in a case of maladjustment to kibbutz conditions of work. In certain instances, individuals were allowed to pursue a professional career in areas unavailable to them on the kibbutz.

A year of "economic autonomy" is a brand new institution (first approved in 1990) in Gimmel-Resh. This institution was based upon the two traditions of the "year of vacation" and "outside work". Kibbutz members acquire jobs outside, and may (under certain conditions) keep a large part of the earnings for themselves, as they go on with "regular kibbutz life". Since 1989, young kibbutz members of 21–28 years of age, after completing military service are given the prerogative to continue living in their kibbutz homes, while holding jobs in town. They are requested to pay minimal participation in kibbutz expenses for their own upkeep, the exact sum being set by the Kibbutz Movement Alignment – so as to avoid disputes within each kibbutz, and so no kibbutz can be singled out as setting a precedent for weakening the ideological foundations. The opportunity to retain full membership on a kibbutz with respect to dwelling and consumption, while holding a job outside, and, at the same time, not having to turn over earnings to the kibbutz, was first granted in 1990 to members above the age of 40. It has been approved by the authorizing institutions because: "It doesn't make much of a difference any longer in view of the great variety of exceptions to our rules that you can find around here."

The secretary-general of the kibbutz who said this was referring to families of non-members who reside in Gimmel-Resh. By the end of 1991, the inhabitants of Gimmel-Resh were divided into the following groups.

Of the 55 persons in the three latter categories, most earned their living outside the kibbutz. A few were hired by the kibbutz and their spouses (who were employed elsewhere) also became residents. As it was expressed, "It is hard to say 'no' to a member who compares his situation to that of a non-member neighbor and comes to the conclusion that he is miserable."

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8See Kressel and Arad, 1977.
Attempts to regulate the outflow of skilled workers

In the face of growing pressure from young and middle-aged members who now want to work in “outside” jobs, the official institutions established a set of rules for the outside worker. A basic criterion (Dapim No. 1586, February 1992) for having “outside” employment approved by the kibbutz is as follows: “Earning per day of production workers in Gimmel-Resh should equal his/her living expenses per day, which totals NIS 123. Therefore, a member will not be allowed to work outside if his/her total daily earnings amount to less than what the kibbutz would have to pay in order to secure a replacement for the job vacated in the kibbutz.

Table 1. The distribution of Gimmel-Resh residents in December 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of members</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary participants in kibbutz life</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers from abroad</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouses of members</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants offered “first flat in the homeland”</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renters of kibbutz apartments who worked outside</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assuming that all the members on the kibbutz opted for outside work, the total number of members (359) multiplied by NIS 123 and, again, by 26 working days in a month, would yield a grand total of NIS 1,138,748. This would be the aggregate monthly income, which is by far smaller than the output obtained from industrial plants and agriculture. Nonetheless, the maintenance of the common assets and their margin of profit have so far remained a non-issue. Although work and not rent of productive capital is at the basis of the debate, the secretary replied to criticism about the loss of income involved in allowing members to work outside, by claiming that only a few kibbutz members working inside the kibbutz actually earn NIS 123 per day. Since figuring the actual monetary worth of each member’s work negates the basic tenet of kibbutz life, that is: “from each according to his/her ability,” resentful members challenged the elected authority asking, what was precisely the course by which this (NIS 123) balance had been reached, and the answer followed.

The average yearly number of “lucrative” work-days, i.e., income-making work-days which are those worked in “productive branches” (excluding work in service branches) – reached only 95 in 1991. The total living expenses of Gimmel-Resh families per year (1991), totaled NIS 4,000,000. This was divided by the number of members (340, excluding the 19 soldiers), yielding NIS 11,764, which was the maintenance cost of a member during 1991. This number divided by 95 gave NIS 123.8, which was endorsed to be the amount required from each of the outside workers per diem.
If the total amount of NIS 4,000,000 were divided by 95, the balance required from each of these “true worker-members” would have been NIS 42,000. This yearly sum, divided by 305 potential annual work days, could determine NIS 137.7 as the amount required from each of the outside workers per diem. However, the logic of consumption (rather than production) determined the bookkeeping, and the new work regulations. In face of the loud claims of members, the secretary had to settle with the lower of the two calculations.

Ninety-five lucrative work-days out of 305 potential annual work days (only 31 percent), is not much, and the secretary had to stress this fact to calm down those who claimed he was unfair. However, members who insisted upon searching for employment elsewhere were not concerned with the secretary’s figures, and disregarded the secretariat’s pleas to stay and help preserve the common assets. If the secretariat does not grant their wish to work outside, they have the option to petition the General Assembly, or use other methods to reverse the decision. In an open letter addressed to those who serve now in the secretariat, a young woman warned them to keep in mind that soon, they too, would be in a position of seeking after outside jobs (Dapim No. 1586, February, 1992). The leaders responded by citing the kibbutz struggle for survival (not subsistence), but to no avail.

Attempts on the part of the kibbutz “establishment” to label outside jobs as inferior to jobs in “the good air” of Gimmel-Resh, were answered by a young woman in an open article (Dapim No. 1586), demanding her right to sell falafel in the streets of the town, if this is what she feels like doing to gain a respite from the "bad air" of the working places at home. Unlike the outside workers in the past who, at first, included potential leaders, then army officers, and professionals, many of the present commuters are the employees of private employers and are engaged as salesmen, sanitary workers, secretaries, watchmen, taxi drivers, and the like. They are willing to do simple service jobs in town, while hired labor in productive branches of the kibbutz has to be drastically curtailed. Moreover, Gimmel-Resh’s requirements for service workers has grown (watchmen, sanitary workers, nurses and geriatric care providers, kitchen work), yet members refuse to do these kinds of work within the kibbutz.

Ideology is what matters

These trends have had the effect of splitting the community into those approving and those rejecting the new realities; in other words, those adhering to the principles of altruism on the one hand, and those who adhere to the newly-acknowledged principles of individualism, on the other. “Individualism”, when examined from an altruistic viewpoint is egoism, inconsiderateness, and the like. When it is examined from the viewpoint of egotism it is both the most elementary human right, as well as a panacea for every problem facing Israel’s national economy. Regularly, the debate shifts from immediate Gemeinschaft concerns – including the moral teaching
of Jewish history during the past generations that presupposed the willingness to act (even die) for a public cause. Bravery seen from an altruistic viewpoint becomes stupidity and self-denial when examined from an egoistical point of view.

Again, the argument is usually presented in terms of national survival, with questions such as: "Who do you think will bother to go on undesirable, vanguard missions? Who, a fortiori, will risk his life for anything else beyond more money and comfort?". Counter-arguments to claims that individualism can be a cure for all the country's ills, were answered by examples of self-seeking political leaders, corrupt civil servants and even army officers who were embezzling public money, and all the more, jeopardized Israel's defense security in pursuit of their own ends. The debate then focused as to whether these things also occurred when socialism was the political praxis, and if overriding concern for Israel's social image reduced their frequency. "When socialism was our political praxis, bargaining at the expense of the public was a cause of deep shame, whereas nowadays, it is the rule of the game."

A perfect example of this occurred in late 1991, when a known public figure invested overseas money he had stolen and managed to flee the country. Although the Israeli press did not applaud the event, it did not find it shocking. Outrageous as it was, the headline in an evening paper merely said: "He saw his chance and took it."

Broadly speaking, the generations on the kibbutz are now split more than ever before. From the elders' viewpoint, neglect of an orchard in exchange for a peddler's "career" is tantamount to a return to the diaspora way of life. An old pedagogue (Latvian by birth) said the following:

My son is a disabled veteran and my grandson sells brillianten (diamonds), as my father dreamt of doing, while Moshe, an 'achtziger' [octogenarian] like me, cultivates our orchards with the remainder of his powers, and I lie in bed and have to put up with all this. Thank G-d, that at least he does so on Allenby Street [in Tel Aviv], not in Riga or New York.

Regularly, egotism and altruism are integral elements of the kibbutz doctrine, as put by the secretary: "one does to his home as he helps to augment the wealth of his community." Presently however, the two "isms" are diametrically opposed, and set the generations apart. Standing in front of Gimmel-Resh old sages, I felt like to express the perplexity I feel vis-à-vis the prospect of individuals who act against the group's economic considerations. In the vein of de Mandeville's Fable of the Bees (1957 [1714]), one often hears that economic success can be better attained by people following their vices, rather than their virtues. In the case of Gimmel-Resh, economic success is within reach, at a point where virtues and vices meet, in order to produce a good "honeycomb". Nevertheless, each younger "bee" acts to raise his own stock of honey, alongside the collective production. That is to say, no swarms are departing, nor are single bees quitting any more than before, as the hive structure changes from within.
To begin with, there are no queens and workers in the kibbutz. Rather, all are workers, apparently equal, who differ however in their amount of influence with regard to use of executive power and decision-making. There is no upheaval, nor coronation of new leaders. Class structure on the kibbutz remains very much the same as it always was. The main change is a decline in the authority of the general assembly, the elected functionaries, the administrative institutions, the control mechanism of public opinion, and of individual conscience, that were depended upon to uphold the social array.

As the regulations implementing the kibbutz tenet “from each according to his ability” disappear, the formal and the latent social hierarchy in the community also decline. In the past, first the ideologists and later managers of enterprises were placed highest in the hierarchy. Now however, since neither group retains influence, no one wishes to fill their places. Although in Gimmel-Resh there are still enough people of caliber and adamant believers in the virtues of communality, the diversion of members’ energies from domestic concerns to all that is entailed in outside employment, lessens respect for community leaders and harms the code of work conduct. Moreover, managerial blunders which brought Gimmel-Resh to the brink of bankruptcy and the concomitant problem of accountability for what happened also has decreased the authority of the local elite (Kressel, 1991). Lack of leadership, when it is most urgently needed, exacerbates the situation. No wonder values of egotism and expediency, of the “petite bourgeoisie”, as the elders call it, prevail.

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*"And whoever enlarges upon the tale of the exodus from Egypt, that one merits praise" (see next page).