

KIBBUTZ JUDAISM

by

Shalom Lilker*

I wish to talk about the kibbutz not so much from the viewpoint of a socialist society, or from the viewpoint of a communal or cooperative society – i. e., how these aspects make the kibbutz a unique phenomenon – but rather to talk about it primarily through the means of its connection with Jewish society, with Jewish life, or even with Jewish history. In other words, since Jewish history until the present, or at least until the creation of the State of Israel, has been primarily a history of a religious ethnic group, naturally the connection which the kibbutz has with the past must also be tied somehow to the religious past. What has occurred in the kibbutz is that the religious past of the Jewish people has undergone a transformation of expression.

In Europe and in the United States, a secularization of much of the cultural life of the Jewish people has been observed. However, in Israel this secularization has taken place within the context of a society where Jews are in the majority, and therefore the kibbutz, at least, has produced a culture, or even a micro-civilization, which, while on the surface being secular and so declaring itself to be, has within it a number of attitudes or manifestations of what has been commonly accepted in the past as religiosity. Therefore I wish to discuss the tie of the kibbutz to its Jewish past, as well as changes in, and even rejections of, certain elements of that past.

First, I wish to point out that the kibbutz society has, or at least has had, a certain amount of ethical or moral authority in Israeli life. I realize there are well-organized strong religious institutions in Israel, particularly of Orthodox Judaism, but in my opinion, that Orthodox Judaism lacks moral authority. In fact, Orthodoxy is the target of many accusations about its behavior, not only towards its own people, but towards others as well – accusations which charge that Orthodox Judaism does not fulfill its role as a religious institution in serving as an example of moral integrity. It does not express much concern or interest about what is occurring outside its own restricted society. This leaves Orthodox Judaism with very little message for much of Israeli society.

On the other hand, though from its inception in Mandate Palestine the kibbutz has had a reputation for being anti-religious, it has created ins-

* Condensation of a lecture given to a group of Dutch and Belgian theologians at Kibbutz Kefar Hamakkabi, January 11, 1975.

tutions which have a great deal of spiritual content. Most of the anti-religious and anti-Orthodox ideology of the kibbutz can not be attributed to an attack on Jewish traditions *per se*, but has been primarily social in origin. First the religious groups of Eastern Europe began to decline in strength; then, when new social groups arose, the religious Jewish institutions and their leaders were offended by, and in certain cases even opposed to, this development.

The Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate was opposed to Zionism because it felt that Zionism was a movement of Jews who were trying to take history into their own hands, rather than waiting for Divine redemption. Granted there was in the beginning of Zionism an Orthodox Zionist movement, but it was a minority. Most of the Orthodox rabbinate, particularly the extremely ultra-Orthodox right wing, were opposed to the concept of Zionism. They felt it was an effort to force the End. Instead, Jews should wait for the Messiah to come; He would lead everyone happily back to the Promised Land. The Zionist movement is the first example in history in which a large number of the Jewish people decided not to wait for the Messiah. Certain elements in rabbinical Judaism, therefore, strongly rejected the Zionist movement.

Only after a growing number of Jews had left traditional Judaism did the Orthodox movement belatedly decide that they too had to have Jewish Orthodox worker groups. But by that time, the non-religious kibbutzniks had come to Israel, and had as one of their major goals the creation of a new and different Jewish culture. The resurrection of the Hebrew language indicates that these kibbutzniks were not a group of individuals who were anxious to assimilate or to lose their distinctive characteristics as Jews. Rather, they came out of a rich Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, and when they came to Israel they attempted to give to their native culture which they had brought with them, a new coloration, as an expression of the life they intended to create here.

All of this goes by way of introduction to my claim that the kibbutz has discovered a new frontier in Jewish life through its quest for an authentic human style of life. The emphasis in my conceptualization is on the human style, because the human being is the center of kibbutz life. "Search" is the cornerstone of the kibbutz faith. Among recent themes in the history of religious quest, the kibbutz exemplifies the search for unity, a motivation that appears in history in the form of "the metaphysical urge." But for the kibbutz, unity has become a social principle. The ideal is to create a society which is a social expression of the oneness of human beings. I realize that this always sounds good on paper, but as we know, the gap between the ideal and the reality, as in many movements and many philosophies, can be quite great. But I prefer to judge the kibbutz, with all my own awareness of its weaknesses, in terms of its goals and not only of its accomplishments.

In other words, when a society says "Let us try to live together justly," it is already doing something quite unusual, for there are many societies which can not even say that much.

At this point I would like to present some abstract thoughts on kibbutz spirituality. The kibbutz does have what one might call a theology, though usually without much "*theos*." In functional terms we can note that there are certain similarities between a religious approach to life and the kibbutz approach. First of all, *the kibbutz has as its basis a very strong faith*. This is not, however, a faith in God, nor a faith in a divine power; it is a faith in man, it is a faith primarily in the idea of the equality of men. This does not mean, as is commonly accepted, that all people are equal before the law, but rather that men should receive equal distribution of the economic rewards of society. But this faith in the equality of men, or this "trust" in men, contains within it more elements of irrationality than even a faith in God contains. The revelation of the presence of God in human societies is intermittent. Many men, on the other hand, serve very well to destroy whatever faith we had in them from the very beginning. To believe in man and in the equality of men is something that to my mind requires a faith that laughs in the face of reality, a faith which has to persevere in spite of the factual considerations that we observe all around us every day. Without this blind faith, I think a kibbutz would not last.

What morally underlines this whole idea of equality? Basically, it is the realization that we are all born unequal. Why should a person be given a prize - e. g., a higher economic status or prestige - for having been born with a higher-than-average intelligence. In the kibbutz, an attempt is made to balance this inequality by creating an equalitarian society. No one is to receive more because he's born intelligent. The person who would not reach a certain economic level in normal competitive situations should be given the opportunity to reach it in the kibbutz, to discover the maximum opportunity for his personal fulfillment to a degree he could never reach in the city. Basically this is a moral principle; it is a rather romantic principle. It comes close to being a utopian vision.

Secondly, *the kibbutz has a ritual structure*. This is very important. Its ritual structure centers primarily on the Jewish holidays, but in addition it also has rites of passage. In most kibbutzim, there are also *bar mitzvah*, marriage, and burial services, ceremonies which are performed within the kibbutz itself. Usually they follow a prescribed form of ritual, created within the kibbutz. The traditional Jewish ceremony - Orthodox, or Conservative or Reform - is not used. It is all local creation. For instance, according to the *Halakha* and to the Laws of the State of Israel, one must, being a Jew, be married by an Orthodox rabbi. However, in the kibbutz a couple is married by a rabbi, and then the kibbutz has an additional ceremony within itself. This pattern of ritual is distinctive to kibbutz society; no one

else has it. No non-Orthodox, no so-called secular group in Israel, has anything even close to the kibbutz ritual. Furthermore, the kibbutz has a distinctive style of life. It is a concrete application of their indigenous faith structure.

Since the kibbutz believes in equality, in an equalitarian society, the problem has become how to create this equalitarian society. Indeed, an Orthodox kibbutznik acquaintance of mine once said: "What the kibbutz has done is to create a *halachah*, a way of life, which for the first time embodies a truly socialistic way of life." What is meant here is not socialism as connected with political parties, but socialism as a theme, as an ideal. Anyone who has gone to a kibbutz has discovered that every little detail, every little point and matter in one's life, is, to some extent, brought under the umbrella of kibbutz living. In that sense one might say the kibbutz is a total way of life.

Example: One must eat in the dining hall. The aim of the kibbutz society is, as I said, to create an equalitarian society. Although there are certain limitations to what can be done, the aim is that there should be an equal distribution of the rewards of society's benefits. So everyone eats in the dining hall. Why don't people eat at home? To assure that everyone gets about the same food. Of course, if a person is sick, he receives a special diet.

Example: Every year about twenty people from my kibbutz apply to go to university. How can it be determined who shall study, and who shall not? In the city, the family itself decides. However, in the kibbutz, let us imagine that twenty people want to study, and the kibbutz only has the financial resources to permit fourteen to study. A committee decides, or tries to decide, together with those individuals who wish to study, who will be allowed to study first. Perhaps the others will have to wait a year or more.

Example: A young person returns from the army. Policy at Kfar Hamakkabi usually requires him to work for a year in the cowshed, because it is difficult to convince people to work there permanently, although it is a very important part of the kibbutz economy.

All these decisions must be made communally. With all the morality of this position, it amounts to a limitation of one's individual freedom. Obviously there are within the kibbutz certain inherent contradictions. When one agrees to share one's possessions with others, individual freedom becomes limited. Personal decisions must suddenly be considered from the point of view of the general good of the community. This may sound fine, but of course it also leads to conflict. In the kibbutz, therefore, there has to be a certain sacrifice of self-interest. And that is difficult, for human nature, being what it is, is not often willing to sacrifice its own personal interest.

The third point is that *the kibbutz has a clear sense of community*, as every religious community must have. No religious person can exist in isolation. Even though the kibbutz is a society that is extremely rational, at the same time it does have, on a subterranean level, a sense of oneness. One finds among certain sectors of the kibbutz a kind of tacit mysticism. By mysticism I do not mean a desire for communication for one God, but rather a sense of oneness with other individuals. It is this feeling of one's tie with other human beings which essentially keeps one in a kibbutz, in addition to one's commitment to the ideal. One can be committed to an idea theoretically, but unless one connects oneself with other human beings, the intellectual idealism can fade away. The kibbutz contains this idea of commonality. The term in Hebrew is *Yachad*, oneness. It is a subterranean, unspoken understanding. A kibbutz member is part of a group which is to remain united.

The kibbutz also has a distinct ethic of its own. This does not mean that a kibbutz person is more ethical than anybody else, because that would be a vain, boastful and arrogant claim. However, the kibbutz style of life imposes certain demands of an ethical nature upon its members. So, for example, stealing is almost unknown in the kibbutz system. But equality also means to some extent that one may not enjoy those benefits which others do not also have, unless those benefits are tied to one's specific needs or requirements. No sort of conspicuous consumption should occur, no self-glorification. For example, at one time there was a decision that no one might own a television set. If one already owned a television, one might not turn it on in one's house; again an imposition upon individual freedom. The idea was not to create a sense of inferiority on the part of others who could not have television. In more recent times, the choice has been more open, and most of the members do own a television.

The last point I would like to make is that *the kibbutz contains within itself elements of*, and even considers itself to be a part of, *a messianic movement, though in a transmuted form.* We know that there were many messianic movements in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, mostly millenarian movements. The kibbutz is a movement which is interested, like some of those movements in the Middle Ages, in creating the ideal society in this world, in bringing Jerusalem from above down to earth. As we know, many of these movements ended in violence and bloodshed because some of the individuals who were part of these messianic movements were interested not only in building their own world, but also in re-vengeing themselves against their various persecutors. The kibbutz in that sense is a completely non-violent movement. However, it does appear to be a redemptive movement, in that it provides an example to the Jewish people of a just world, as well as an opportunity for the redemption of its members – not religious redemption, but more an individual fulfillment in

psychological terms. Yet there is also within the movement the basis for contradiction; its aim is to fulfill people, but on the other hand it limits what they can do.

What is missing substantially in everything I've discussed thus far is this: *kibbutz thought does not contain anything even faintly related to what we might consider a cosmology*, anything that has a tie to the question of the relationship not only between man and his neighbor or man and his society, but also between man and nature and man and God. That simply doesn't exist. This is because the kibbutz is a very this-worldly society; its major concern is transformation of this world as it is, building something new and different. This lack of cosmology is not directly the result of the kibbutz's having taken an agnostic position regarding religion, though indeed it has taken such a stand. At one time they took an atheistic position, especially in the left-wing Marxist movement. However, this agnostic stand is related to the fact that the kibbutz is a relatively young group society, though by standards of communal societies it is rather old. Most communal groups break up within a short amount of time, with the exception of the Hutterites or the Mennonites, however, which were Protestant sects with close ties to the New Testament. However, most of the so-called secular communities don't last very long. The kibbutz may ultimately develop in the direction of a definite cosmology; I really don't know. It is a function of time, a function of experience. My feeling is that the kibbutz may change in the course of time because it is a movement which contains all the basic elements of spirituality. Sooner or later, the kibbutz movement will begin to ask itself ultimate questions. When this will begin I cannot predict, but there is a limit to how "this-worldly" one can be. The development of spirituality is a topic which demands a fair measure of intellectual sophistication, and the kibbutz has been intellectually sophisticated in many areas. But in this one area the kibbutz movement has no contact with what is going on in the rest of the world. There is presently extremely little concern for these deeper questions. Perhaps when Israeli society as a whole gets out of the period of concern with survival, it can turn to these other questions.

Actually the kibbutz movement is not growing at the moment, primarily because of anguish about goals. Some people want only better education for their children; others want only a pioneering kibbutz. The movement will probably grow very slowly in the future. Not everyone fits this style of life. The kibbutz no longer represents the growing edge of Israeli society; it is a minority viewpoint within the larger culture.

The kibbutz permits itself a large measure of freedom in the alteration of traditional religious ceremonies within Judaism, as for example the traditional form of marriage. In some kibbutzim, a rabbi has a ceremony only for the family and a few guests. Afterwards the kibbutz invites all the members to the dining room. As far as the kibbutz is concerned the religious

marriage is the civil ceremony. If a couple decides they wish to be married, they go to the *mazkir* (general secretary) of the kibbutz; they ask for a room and they simply live together, in a sort of trial marriage. Later they may decide to get married or not, but promiscuity hardly exists. This trial marriage of course does not occur in Orthodox kibbutzim.

Bar mitzvah is another example of a carry-over from past traditions. Usually the ceremony is held in the dining hall. The ritual is considered to be a transition ceremony, in which one leaves childhood and enters adolescence. Herein the point is made that one cannot cut oneself off from the past tradition; instead, the *bar mitzvah* is tied into the education of young people within the kibbutz system. The ceremony is retained in the kibbutz because it has a historical past. Attempts have even been made to reintroduce practices which disappeared in Biblical times following the destruction of the Second Temple, for example, the wine festival, the sheep-shearing festival, the *omer* festival. Some kibbutzim have attempted to reinstitute these forgotten ceremonies. They discovered, however, that one cannot artificially create a form which has no contact with the immediate past; you cannot jump back two thousand years. Only those holidays that have become the custom of the Jewish people within the past few centuries could easily take root in the kibbutz. Those holidays which were an attempt to reinstitute a Biblical past never took root.

I would also like to make some further remarks about Jewish holidays in the kibbutz. What is different about the Jewish holidays in the kibbutz? The difference is that those Jewish holidays, which are usually practiced in detail by Jews in the rest of the world, are hardly practiced at all by the kibbutz. The two days in the year in which Jews appear in the synagogues in rather large numbers, and which are almost entirely holidays of a religious nature – Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur – practically find no expression in the kibbutz. On the other hand, holidays which occur during the rest of the year – Passover, Sukkoth, Shavuot, Purim, Chanukah – are holidays which in the kibbutz are given special stress and meaning for a clear reason: many of the people who came into the kibbutz movement were interested in the renewal of Jewish culture. In that sense, the kibbutz is the unique contribution to the restoration of Jewish holidays; one can observe a holiday in organic connection with the type of life one lives. What happened in Europe and the United States with Sukkoth? One built a booth; one decorated it with flowers and fruit which one bought in a store. In the kibbutz, on the other hand, there is a natural connection with the celebration of the holiday.

I must also mention the restoration of the sense of Jewish nationalism, which is a part of all nationalist movements beginning in the 19th century. I feel that certain holidays – for example Chanukkah and Passover – which represent a desire for freedom on the part of the Jewish people, must be

made relevant to the conditions of life. If you are sitting in a synagogue in Europe or the United States and talking about freedom, it really does not mean very much, because you are living in a relatively free democratic society. There is, therefore, a certain amount of lipservice that one pays to the tradition or the ritual, but its connection with life is not always necessarily evident. This is a problem all we have: the connection of one's teachings with life's problems. Now here in the kibbutz, all of a sudden the rituals found meaning. Holidays, particularly those connected with agriculture, sprang to life. Holidays connected with freedom, national independence, and the national rebirth of the Jewish people also sprang to life. However, holidays which were connected to prayer – like Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur – were not included as aspects of the revival to which people were willing to commit themselves. There are kibbutzim in which there is a ceremony on Rosh HaShanah, but it is not a religious ceremony. There are synagogues in kibbutzim for members who wish to go, but synagogue ceremonies which the whole kibbutz attends are rare occurrences. The kibbutz way of life in which everyone eats in the dining hall means that, for example, on Rosh HaShanah there is usually a festive meal, followed by a short ceremony of approximately half an hour, to which everyone comes primarily because they come to eat, though they readily participate in the ceremony. It is not only a meal; it is also a community celebration. The style of life in the kibbutz encourages communal forms of celebration.

What is it then that is really distinctive about the kibbutz? First, I would conclude that the kibbutz includes ritual in its form of life, particularly as it is related to the Jewish past. Although there are no professional religious functionaries, no clergy, some one may assume the role of a religious functionary by gaining authority on the basis of his knowledge, his understanding, or his personality. When holidays arise, one has no standard procedure. The cultural committee of the kibbutz determines how to observe each individual holiday. Certain material is provided by the organized kibbutz movement, but the main idea is that holidays are to be an expression of the individual personality of each kibbutz. In other words, kibbutz religion is a layman's religion, a layman's approach. It is usually conceptualized and executed by average people. My personal opinion is that the kibbutz has been, and perhaps still is, a form of revelation of the Spirit. How I'm not quite sure; it is all too early to say. In that opinion, I am probably a minority of one within most of the kibbutz movement.

Secondly, I would conclude that the kibbutz has a viable ritual, though without any cosmological packaging. In other words, it is possible to say that within the kibbutz there is a ritual which can last, even though it does not have any sort of divine authority. Thirdly, the kibbutz is a unique and unprecedented form of Jewish life, a "communal Judaism." The communal Judaism of the kibbutz is something new; it is the first time that

Jewish society has been formed on a communitarian basis. In this sense the kibbutz is a major contribution to Jewish life, something which has never appeared before. What will ultimately happen to the kibbutz, I am unable to predict. Some of the founders of the kibbutz movement kept diaries, for they didn't know if the kibbutz would still exist in the generation which followed them, and they wanted therefore to record their own experiences for future historians. There is even yet no certainty about the continuity of the movement, but nevertheless, even within the short time that it has existed, the kibbutz has given a significant and positive contribution to Jewish life and Jewish religion.

Shalom Lilker is a member of Kibbutz Kfar Hamaccabi.