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Collective Education in the Kibbutz: A Personal Experience

*"The communal education of children is indispensable for the perpetuation of kibbutz values."*¹

the kibbutz phenomenon

The kibbutz movements have played an important part in the founding, building and protection of the State of Israel. The founders of the kibbutzim² were the oppressed Jews who fled, mostly from Poland and Russia to Palestine in waves of migration between 1882 and 1948. The goal of the immigrants to Palestine was largely based on the ideal of the return to the land of their ancestors and on self-labor.³ The pioneers felt that by working the land they could identify with it more readily. It was through work that they would eventually build a dynamic and free nation.

The elements of self-labor were already discernable in the "First Aliya," although for the most part this initial influx consisted of poor immigrants who became gentlemen farmers, settled in villages or ran plantations which were worked by hired Arabs. During the "Second Aliya," the concept of self-labor became more important and A. D. Gordon, considered one of the founders of Socialist-Zionist ideology, formulated the expression, "The religion of labor." It was this concept which largely motivated the Socialist and the Zionist youth who came to settle the land of their ancestors.

Initially, kibbutzim were created partly for economic and security reasons and partly as a Socialist-Zionist venture in which everybody would be equal. Everyone would give according to his ability and receive according to his needs. From its inception, the kibbutz phenomenon has played a crucial as well as a controversial role in the history of the modern re-

settlement of Israel. Kibbutzim embodied the strong aspirations of young European Jews to transform stagnating Jewish history. By bringing ever increasing amounts of land under Jewish cultivation, kibbutzim were to provide the foundation for the creation of the new State of Israel in 1948. From the single kibbutz, *Degania Alef* at the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, there are now over 250 kibbutzim located in every part of Israel.

Kibbutz life is sometimes strongly criticized, other times wholeheartedly praised, but rarely is it genuinely understood. This is perhaps because only a relatively small number of people have had the opportunity to appreciate kibbutz life in its personal dimensions. On the other hand, objective appraisals often foreclose true insight. The unique collective education system of the kibbutzim, for example, has recently been a source of great interest to many educators, but few have been able to experience it. Therefore, it is hoped that this essay, which is limited to a personal reflection on working with and observing four and five year olds in the kindergarten at *Kibbutz Mizra*, will offer some small contribution to the understanding of collective education in kibbutzim.

the collective education system

When a kibbutz mother returns from the hospital with her newly born infant, she has the option of keeping him with her in her room⁴ for six weeks and then placing him in the "baby house," or placing him directly in the "baby house" where, along with other babies, he will be looked after by qualified nurses. At the age of one-and-a-half to two, the children are moved to the "toddler's house" in groups of four to six, then when they reach four or five years of age, three groups are amalgamated to form a kindergarten. At this stage they make their second move to a new building. A trained kindergarten teacher is put in charge of their education and three housemothers are put in charge of their daily needs. The roles of the teacher and the housemothers are sometimes interchangeable. It is the job of the nurses, housemothers and teachers to help the children develop socially and educationally.

The children move again when they begin their elementary schooling and from the age of twelve they leave the children's community for the "mossad," the regional boarding high school which serves a number of kibbutzim. Here the children are offered a wide curriculum and their talents or special interests are explored.

One of the purposes of the collective education system is to leave the parents free to work and another is to transmit kibbutz values to the youngsters, while eliminating the often strained and frustrated relationships which arise in families as a result of interdependence. The child is dependent on the kibbutz as a whole and not on his parents for both his daily and his specialized needs. Therefore, when one or both of his parents visit him during the day, or when the child visits his parents in the afternoon, the relationship between them is not one in which the parents hold something over the child, nor is it one in which the child resents his parents. It is ideally a relationship based on friendship and love. The kibbutz strives to achieve three basic goals in the upbringing of its children: to teach the values of sharing and equality (community-spirit); to teach the meaning of physical labor; to transmit their Jewish heritage and to emphasize the significant place of kibbutzim in modern history in the hope that they will conscientiously choose to remain on the kibbutz and promote its values and ideals.

Kibbutz education has proved itself in two general ways. Firstly, it has proved effective in its aim of perpetuating itself as a large percentage of children who were brought up in kibbutzim have absorbed its values and have stayed on as kibbutz members. Secondly, a remarkably large number of people who were raised in kibbutzim, or at least spent part of their formative years there, have gone on to become leaders, political or military figures. Although only 4% of the population of Israel live on kibbutzim, 25% of the army officers in Israel are members of kibbutzim.

housemother in the gan

In the fall of 1973, motivated by Zionist inclinations and led by curiosity about kibbutz life, my husband and I immigrated to Israel. We spent our first five months in a *Merca Ha Klita*, an absorption centre, which was situated on a kibbutz. From this *Merca Ha Klita* we chose to settle in *Kibbutz Mizra* where I began to work as a housemother in *Gan Hagar*.⁵

The layout of the *gan* seems well suited for small children. To one side of the hallway there are five bedrooms where the boys and girls sleep together. This fact surprised me at first, but after a few moments reflection I realized that, in fact, non-discrimination between the sexes is part of the concept of equality. The bedrooms are rather spartan because they are reserved for sleeping only and are empty of toys, but each

has three to four wardrobes and an equal number of beds with small pictures hanging over them. From the beginning, the children are trained to keep their toys in the play area and the bedroom is referred to as the "overnight room."

One of the first things I observed was that cleanliness and tidiness were primary concerns. The floors, bathrooms, walls and windows were regularly washed and scrubbed so that from the time they are born, the children are exposed to the ritual of cleaning. Sometimes under guided supervision they are permitted to help. As a result of this exposure to cleanliness, the children grow up to value and promote this ideal.

The teacher explained to me that "development" is the key word in the *gan*. There are no "wallflowers." The youngsters are constantly encouraged to be active and to participate. Since it is the teacher and the housemothers, and not the parents, who are primarily responsible for the children's upbringing, it is their duty not only to teach and take care of these youngsters, but also to show affection to them. Therefore, the multiple role of the teacher and the housemothers can be a very difficult one. They want to receive a certain amount of respect from the children and at the same time they want each child to feel loved, although they must be careful not to show favoritism.

At one time, in the early stages of kibbutzim, it was believed that in a common child rearing system, where all the children received equally in terms of education, material and non-material things, a new type of person would be created. However, today's kibbutz members know differently. It was not possible to create a new and uniform person. In the kibbutz, like anywhere else, individual children have individual problems and often they have special needs. Nevertheless, the ideal of equality still prevails in the *gan* and the problem of how to reconcile the child's individuality with the ideal of equality is one the teacher and housemothers come into contact with every day.

the daily routine

The children are awakened at 7:00 a.m. in the cooler winter months (earlier in the summer) and are taken to the showers. After they are dressed and ready, they get a cup of hot cocoa and are off to play till breakfast at 8:30. In the early hours, as well as in the afternoon, the youngsters are free to choose whatever game or toy they want and they receive some individual supervision from the teacher. As a rule, the teacher tries

not to interfere in the activity they have chosen, but she will observe them carefully and note their patterns of behavior. The children who play outdoors can choose the junk yard (which is full of boxes and old parts of furniture and cars which the children can use to build), or the playground, or the woodwork table or other areas. Kibbutz youngsters will very rarely refer to any activity they are doing as "play." When they are building, drawing or arranging materials they call their activity "work." The concept of work has apparently become a reality to them at a very early age. On one occasion, when I saw a little girl busily banging on some nails and wood on the woodwork table and asked her what game she was playing, she looked at me indignantly and said, "What I am doing is called work not play."

For breakfast, the child-sized tables and chairs are arranged in three groups and at least one adult sits with each. Children are not forced to eat what they do not want, but they are taught to show some table manners and to finish whatever they asked for. After meals, they are expected to clear their own dishes but if a child should leave the table without doing so, he is summoned back. This is one of the ways in which children are taught to have responsibility.

Before the youngsters finish their breakfast, the teacher announces the main activity for the morning. Often this consists of preparation for one of the numerous Jewish holidays. The teacher may read a Biblical story which corresponds to the approaching holiday and later the children are asked to take on certain roles and act out the story. Sometimes the teacher will explain why particular traditions exist and then the children carry out the ritual involved. In this way they become familiarized with the Jewish heritage and learn to identify with their religion. Once, when I told a curious little girl that I was a Canadian, she looked at me in disbelief and said, "No you're not. You are a Jew, aren't you?"

On Fridays the children are guided in baking the traditional "chala" loaf, tidying up, singing special songs and preparing their Friday night clothing to welcome the Sabbath. In addition to holidays, birthdays are also special days in the *gan*. A cake is baked, songs are sung, presents are given and games are played to make every child feel that his or her day is an important one and that the whole group wishes to share in celebrating it. One little boy in the *gan* had the misfortune of losing his father in the "War of Yom Kippur" and he subsequently became perplexed and reserved. The teacher then began to introduce the idea of death to the children and she tried

to help them to talk about it and express how they felt about it. When the memorial day was held for the boy's father, all the children were taken to the cemetery and so were exposed to this reality for the first time.

When the weather permits, the children are taken out for walks in which they learn something about their surroundings and the work which is being done in the kibbutz. The work varies from industry, to maintenance of services, to animal raising and farming. At this time, the children may happen to see their fathers or mothers as they are working in a particular branch of the kibbutz and they will point them out with pride.

The children have their own little vegetable and flower gardens as well as their own cage of guinea pigs. These areas are situated beside the *gan* and the youngsters are already being taught to take care of them. During their free time, children are encouraged to draw and paint because it is felt that this is a very important means for them to express themselves. They are never told what to draw nor how to draw and the teacher tries to minimize her comments about a picture so as not to influence the child in what he will express.

At 4:00 p.m. the youngsters are sent off to their parents' room where they remain until bedtime. The hours they spend with their parents represent a special time for them. It is a time when the children can take what they have learned during the day while they were with their peers and put it to practice elsewhere. Many children can be found helping their parents in preparing special treats, talking about the things around them as they go for walks, or independently working on some project. The relationship between the parents and the children at this time is a warm and relaxed one because the children have had a chance to work out any frustrations or excess energy they may have had in the *gan*. As for the parents, they are free after a day's work to devote a few hours exclusively to their children without having to worry about disciplining them (this is done in the *gan*) nor about the regular household chores, because most of these are taken care of by the kibbutz.

adult relationships

The collective child-rearing system on the kibbutz seems to provide a healthy milieu for the children. However, whether the system is as ideal for the adults as it is for the youngsters is debatable. Inevitably, there is friction between the women

in the kindergarten. The ways they have of keeping house or of doing things in general may not always agree. Also, conflict arises between the housemothers-in-charge and the parents. Since the teacher is responsible for the children's well-being a large part of the day, she becomes a second mother to them. "I am ready to do everything and anything for the children," I once heard the teacher explain. Theoretically, of course, this attitude is necessary and expected of her. However, in practice, it happens that the parents may feel that the teacher is not treating their child in the way that they themselves would have liked him or her to be treated. At other times, the teacher may find herself under pressure from the parents to acquire certain things for the *gan*. The relationships between the parents and the teachers, therefore, can be very touchy.

On rare occasions it even happens that, after an argument with the teacher, the parents will not visit their child in the children's house. Generally, however, the teacher and the parents try to iron out any misunderstanding because, after all, the teacher is to be one of the main figures in the child's life for a few years⁶ and so it is to the advantage of everyone involved to be on good terms. Thus, the parents encourage their child to love and respect the teacher and the housemothers.

The extent to which the occasional tension in the *gan* affects the youngsters is difficult to judge. However, from my observation of the generally friendly and pleasant inter-relationships in the kindergarten, I would guess that the impact on the children of this tension is of a very limited nature. An older member of the kibbutz, who subsequently became a good friend, proudly told us how the objectives of the first settlers have been achieved — the land has been cultivated and the kibbutzim have become the backbone of Israel; the kibbutz values have become appreciated and recognized throughout the country and, for the most part, are being successfully transmitted to the children. The old settler seemed concerned, however, when he proceeded to tell us that he did not know what new goals the children of the kibbutz would have. Would their purpose be only to improve their standard of living and to perpetuate kibbutz values?

There are other problems still to be settled. For example, some parents feel that they would like to see a change in the collective education system which would allow their children to sleep at home and sometimes they feel that they would like to have more influence on their children's upbringing. On the

other hand, they realize that the system of collective education is much more effective in transmitting kibbutz values to the children than they themselves could ever be. On more than one occasion I have heard a parent exclaim, "My child belongs to the kibbutz!"

references

1. M. E. Spiro, *Kibbutz-Venture in Utopia*, New York: Schocken Books, 1972, p. 19.
2. "Kibbutzim" is the Hebrew plural of kibbutz.
3. "Self-labor" in this essay is used to mean working oneself as opposed to hiring people to do physical work.
4. The people who live on the kibbutz refer to their homes as "the room."
5. "Gan" is the Hebrew word for kindergarten. "Hagar" is the name of the teacher of this particular group.
6. The children may spend more than a year in kindergarten and the teacher may take them through grade one.

O. Rovinescu, C. Ruggles, W. Reid & P. Muldering, eds.

Expressions of Montreal Youth

An anthology of poetry written by Montreal children relating to photographs of their community and edited by McGill Faculty of Education students.

Montreal: Reigg Ethnic Expressions, 1974. \$3.00.

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