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MAGAZINE

The last living kibbutz

With privatization and capitalism the norm, Kibbutz Samar continues to hold on to socialist ideals

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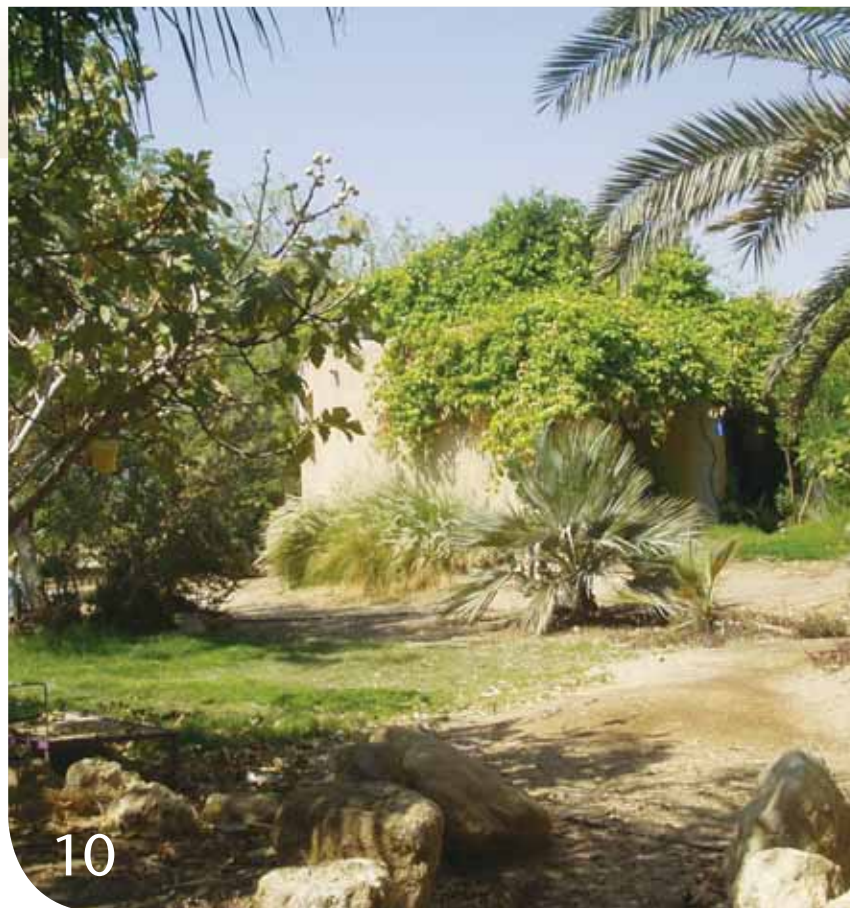
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A TRACTOR is seen in the date fields of Kibbutz Samar. Once heavily subsidized by the government, most kibbutzim turned to privatization and capitalism to make money. (Yardena Schwartz)



(Yardena Schwartz)

CARO BUZAL, a German volunteer in the date trees of Kibbutz Samar. She decided to volunteer on the kibbutz because of its specific socialist ideals.

The last living kibbutz

How one kibbutz has managed to stay true to its founding dream, despite the movement's warm embrace of capitalism

• YARDENA SCHWARTZ

For Zionists of a certain age, particularly those who were in Israel in the '60s, '70s or '80s and volunteered on a kibbutz, a visit to one of those communities today would likely be a depressing experience.

Today's kibbutzim, for the most part, at least, are really only kibbutzim by name.

Twenty years ago, virtually every kibbutz had a volunteer program, according to Aya Sagi, director of the Kibbutz Program Center. Today, out of 270 kibbutzim, only 30 take in volunteers.

Cultivating the soil of Israel was once the image of a true Zionist – a dirty job, but a job to be revered. Today, according to Agricultural Ministry spokeswoman Dafna Yurista, the vast majority of agricultural workers on kibbutzim are foreign laborers, most of them from Thailand.

Perhaps more startling is that just 60 kibbutzim – less than a quarter of the country's total – remain communal, equalized cooperatives. The rest have become partially or completely privatized, with most members working outside, earning salaries according to their respective jobs, and often paying out of their own pockets for services like healthcare and education.

Long gone are the days of the idealistic Kibbutz Movement, which lived by the motto "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

As Israeli society evolved from a scrappy generation of land-harvesting pioneers to the hi-tech generation of the Start-up Nation, kibbutzim had to adjust to a new age of capitalism, trading in socialist ideals for market realism.

Times change, after all.

And that shouldn't surprise anyone, according to Shlomo Getz, the former director of the University of Haifa's Institute for Research on the Kibbutz and the Cooperative Idea.

"Change is not a four-letter word," says Getz, now a sociology professor at the Max Stern Academic College of Emek Yezreel. "Can you think of any society that is exactly the same today as it was 100 years ago? The kibbutz is a commune, but it is still part of Israeli society and is influenced by what is going on around it. Now that the capitalist way of life is the way of life in Israel, the kibbutzim are influenced by that and respond to the surroundings of their environment."

YET THE dramatic changes that have taken place on kibbutzim over the past few decades weren't caused only by shifts in societal values.

The economic crisis that shook the country in the 1980s played a major role in the demise of the kibbutz dream, as high inflation led many kibbutzim into debt, and financial support from the government shriveled up.

When the government enacted the Economic Stabilization Plan of 1985, it initiated drastic spending cuts, eventually leading to a steep and rapid decline in subsidies and other monetary support for kibbutzim.

Suddenly these communities – once heavily subsidized by the government – had to fend for themselves, leading many to embrace capitalism, and with it, privatization.

"In many ways," says Michal Palgi, the current director of the University of Haifa's Institute for Research on the Kibbutz, "this crisis strengthened the ideas of those who doubted the kibbutz ideology and thought that maybe the socialist ideology is not enough in order to remain viable economically."

High debt coupled with the loss of support from the government meant that kibbutzim had to reinvent themselves as sturdier economic institutions that could provide for their members, leading to the situation today, where the vast majority are privatized economic engines that generate 40 percent of the country's agricultural produce, despite representing just 1.7% of the population.

Despite this massive transformation, some kibbutzim have managed to hold on to their original values, as evidenced by the 60 that remain communal. But even those don't bear much resemblance to the idealistic kibbutz dream. Most of their members work elsewhere, members have different salaries, foreign workers do much of their agricultural work, and many do not accept volunteers.

Against that backdrop, one kibbutz has resisted the seduction of capitalism and stood by the socialist, communal ideals of its founders – despite the disadvantages that come with that decision.

According to kibbutz experts, Samar is the closest thing you can find today to the original.

"The original kibbutz, not exactly," says Getz, who lives on Kibbutz Gadot in the North. "But Samar is closest to what you think of as a true kibbutz."



Ofer Noiman, the spokesman for the Kibbutz Movement, seconds that notion, saying that Samar is probably the only kibbutz that has stayed truly, completely socialist.

SITUATED AMONG the dusty pink mountains of the Arava, near Eilat, Samar has about 100 members, no foreign workers, a robust volunteer program, and a successful organic date production and exporting business that serves as the leading source of income for members, the majority of whom work on the kibbutz. There is no institutionalized religion, and the fully operational communal dining hall is not kosher. It is open not only on Shabbat, but also on Yom Kippur, when it holds one dinner for non-fasters and another for those who are breaking the fast. This year, some people attended both meals. After all, it's free.

In fact, everything on the kibbutz is free. Not just education, healthcare, meals at the dining hall, and other services, but members can get most of their essentials from the kitchen or the kibbutz supply center. Money simply doesn't exist here, nor is there a store for shopping, a basic requirement on most kibbutzim.

"We have a kitchen, and if you need something you go to the kitchen and you take it," says Marjorie Strom, the general manager at Samar. "It doesn't have chocolate and Cheerios and ice cream, but if you want those things, you go to Eilat and you buy them. The supply room also has basic stuff, like soap and shampoo, but again, basic stuff. If you want Pantene, you have to go to Eilat."



The urban kibbutz

• GREER FAY CASHMAN

From its very beginnings in 1926, Kibbutz Ramat Rahel was intended as an urban kibbutz.

Several of its founders were skilled craftsman with various professions in construction who contributed greatly to the building of Jerusalem, says chairman Yosef Avi Yair Engel, whose grandchildren are fourth-generation kibbutzniks.

Ramat Rahel is probably best known as a destination for weddings, a stop-over on the way to Rachel's Tomb or a relaxing getaway. Foreign tourism makes up about 60 percent of its business, and Engel can be seen as one of the major players in promoting tourism to kibbutzim.

Elected head of the kibbutz earlier this year, Engel had previously worked for Shimon Peres, stepping down when the president ended his tenure.

The son of Holocaust survivors, Engel was born in Yokne'am in the North. He arrived at Ramat Rahel with a nucleus of young army conscripts in 1964 with his wife, Yonit; the two had five children. Today, they have 10 grandchildren.

In 1970, he became manager of the kibbutz hotel, which led him to begin studying hotel management in 1972. Engel was keen to encourage youth to settle on kibbutzim or moshavim; to promote this idea, he went to work for then-tourism minister Uzi Baram. It was there that Engel worked with other kibbutzim to persuade them to develop guest rooms and restaurants approved by the Tourism Ministry.

Sitting high on a Jerusalem hilltop, Ramat Rahel stands like an oasis at the terminal of the No. 7 bus route. The kibbutz overlooks Bethlehem – only four kilometers away – and has a stunning panorama of the Old City. This observation point was built in memory of Engel's son Yair, who died in a diving accident at age 19 while serving in the IDF. Engel, commonly known as Jucha, has memorialized him in many ways, including adding his name to his own.

"This was all desert," Engel says proudly, as he surveys the complex of buildings surrounded by gardens with their carefully tended, colorful variety of flowers, shrubs and trees.

On the kibbutz, Engel has worked in almost every position and can recite its history by heart. He is an avid photographer and boasts an impressive album of the kibbutz's antiquities. These include ancient irrigation networks, ritual baths, remains of a third-century Byzantine church and a centuries-old factory which used to produce a honey beverage similar to mead. Famous archeologists, including the late Yigael Yadin, visited and worked on the site, which has had six seasons of digs with hundreds of volunteers.

Its pioneers from the Gdud Ha'avo-

da workers' battalion started out in 1921 in a different site at Givat Shaul, then moved to Ratisbonne, and in 1925 purchased eight hectares (about 20 acres) of land from the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate on a then desolate site where the kibbutz stands today. The original nucleus put up the first tent in time for Shavuot 1926. The original name of the kibbutz? Hahityashvut, or The Settlement.

A year later, those who had remained in Ratisbonne moved to the kibbutz, which was then officially inaugurated and given a change of name by Zionist leader Menachem Ussishkin. Ramat Rahel was taken from the prophecy of Rachel – whose tomb, as mentioned, is nearby – that she need not cry for her children because they will return to their borders.

The goal of the kibbutz, says Engel, was to build foundations not only for itself but for the future growth of Jerusalem. Its construction workers were engaged in building the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University, and the first house on King George Avenue.

However, during the Arab riots of 1929, the kibbutz was destroyed. The members returned a year later and rebuilt what was burnt down. In 1931, it opened what is believed to be the first kibbutz guest house for summer vacation groups.

During the War of Independence, the kibbutz was again under attack and conquest, with the Egyptians on one side and the Jordanians on the other. After two days of heavy fighting, Israeli forces succeeded in regaining control over the area. A permanent reminder of the war are the bullet holes that pockmark the original guest house.

Amid construction to enlarge the hotel, weapons from the British Mandate period were found in an extensive underground cache. Today, it is covered by a glass floor panel so that visitors can see part of the history of the state and the role played by the

kibbutz.

Although it falls under the jurisdiction of the Mateh Yehuda Regional Council, Ramat Rahel is considered part of greater Jerusalem, especially since 1967. From the 1949 cease-fire until the end of the Six Day War, says Engel, the kibbutz was situated on the Green Line and was an IDF enclave. Throughout that period, the pre-state members of the kibbutz were not permitted to return to their original homes; 36 families then built new accommodations on the lower part of the hill. Massive development began only after the 1967 victory.

For ideological reasons, the original 8 hectares purchased were given to Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund so that the kibbutz would not have private assets. Because of the traumatic events to which it has been subjected, the kibbutz does not have a written record of the transaction, and attempts to get one from other sources have been consistently stonewalled.

Kibbutz members do not have to buy their homes, and many work outside. Their salaries are paid to the kibbutz, and Engel explains that while people are expected to give to the best of his ability, everyone has equal entitlement to what the kibbutz dispenses – including the use of a car, of which there is a fleet.

Ramat Rahel has a communal dining hall, infant and toddler day-care centers, and a 400-member senior citizens' home. There is no on-site school; instead, children attend local schools in Talpote. One problem on the horizon is housing for young people. Land designated for agriculture but never utilized could theoretically be reassigned for residential purposes, but the decision is not purely in the hands of the kibbutz and needs to go through the government.

Ramat Rahel is, today, a most interesting blend of ancient and modern that has developed dramatically since its founding.



YOSEF AVI YAIR ENGEL, or Jucha, with his wife Yonit and children of the kibbutz. (Courtesy)



CHILDREN ON the kibbutz make hamantaschen for Purim. All food is free and members are encouraged to take what they need. (Marjorie Strom)



CONSTRUCTION BEGINS on new housing in Samar, in the Arava desert. (Marjorie Strom)

Not only is there no tangible use of money on Samar, there is absolutely no personal allowance system. On other kibbutzim, even those that have remained communal and haven't resorted to differentiated pay, each family has an allowance based on the size of their household. That limited budget is the amount they can spend each month, with certain things that are included and others that aren't.

At Samar, everybody spends as much money as they feel they need. Which is why they are facing a budget deficit this year.

"People are spending as much as they need but more than they have, which is a problem," says Strom, who has lived on this kibbutz for 17 years. She moved here from Kibbutz Lotan, where she lived for 10 years before meeting her husband – fittingly – at the regional date-packing plant.

Strom explains that there is an agreed-upon general budget of personal expenses that includes private doctors, psychologists, after-school programs and special schools children might need.

"But that doesn't mean that if one person spends more, they're going to be punished for it," she says.

No one at Samar is told where to work, or to work at all. There are some on the kibbutz who choose not to work. They also don't count vacation days.

"It's not a perfect system," Strom admits, "and it doesn't always work, but it's been working like this for almost 40 years now. And looking at my neighbors on other kibbutzim, even when they have very strict budgets, they have times when they go into debt, too. So I don't think our system is any worse in terms of economic responsibilities."

Like the original kibbutzim, most decisions at Samar are taken to a vote, or made by consensus, "where by the time they've gotten up for a vote, they've been through a process of discussion, and people have more or less come to a conclusion that this is the right thing to do," says Strom.

For example, when members decide on a budget at the beginning of the year, they discuss the budget for building and improving members' homes. The people working on that budget will put forward a list of people who want to build on their home, with estimates of how much that investment is going to cost. Yet unlike the original kibbutzim, where decisions were set

in stone, Samar's principles allow for much more individual freedom.

"Any decision made by the general assembly that requires something from the individual is a recommendation only," explains Strom.

One might expect that such leniency would invite a freewheeling attitude, but so far, recommendations have been met with respect.

THERE'S A certain trust that has been in place, and seems to be working well, since Samar's founding in 1976.

That's what attracted a young German volunteer named Caro Buzal to Samar. Buzal is not Jewish and had never been to Israel before. But she was aware of the country's kibbutz phenomenon and knew that volunteering was a great way to stay in the country for a while and work outdoors. What brought her to Samar specifically?

"I was really interested in the socialist concept of the kibbutzim, and there aren't many like that anymore," says the 26-year-old, who arrived in May. "I told the Kibbutz Program Center that I wanted a socialist kibbutz, and they recommended this one."

Aside from free lodging, food, and an education at one of the country's most successful date plantations, Buzal has gained immediate access to a community of like-minded individuals. The kibbutz regularly holds parties and events to help everyone get to know each other.

"This is what I expected from a real kibbutz," she says, taking a break from her work in the date orchard to sit in the shade with her fellow volunteers. "I expected that on a more socialist kibbutz, as a volunteer, you are more part of the community, and it's not just about the work or about the money."

At any given time, according to Strom, there are about 20 to 50 young volunteers of various backgrounds. Some, like Buzal, come from abroad, but most of them are Israelis, either before or after the army.

"We've got people who came off the street because they were thirsty and stayed," says Strom. "One of our members was waiting for a bus, it didn't come, and someone invited her into the kibbutz. She came, stayed and is now married with children. Usually we're looking for people who've finished the army, traveled, come back from India... people like that."

Buzal and other volunteers also benefit from a vigor-

ous work-study program, where they work five days a week in the fields, and then study agriculture and philosophy one day a week.

They also get some pocket money. It's just NIS 400 a month, but when you're living on the kibbutz and not buying anything, that can add up. Volunteers that Buzal knows on other kibbutzim get paid more, but "they have to pay for things," she notes. "We don't get much money here, but we don't need money here."

Still, there are downsides to operating a profitable agricultural operation based on the work of volunteers.

"We have a theoretical schedule," laughs Josie Schiffeldrin, who has no official title at the kibbutz, but whose job is to coordinate the kibbutz volunteers. The English native came to Samar four years ago with the intention of volunteering for six months, and she's still there.

Asked who is in charge of the work in the date orchard, she says, "There is no manager. Everyone is equal" – a concept that truly reflects Samar's socialist nature.

"Yes, it would be more efficient to hire foreign workers" as most other kibbutzim have done, she says, adding, "We're a little behind because of manpower. But we want people to work with us, not for us."

Indeed, most kibbutzim have abandoned their volunteer programs for that very reason. It's simply not economical.

Sure, volunteers are essentially unpaid workers, but "nothing's for free," says Strom. While foreign workers typically stay on a kibbutz to work for five years, volunteers, she says, stay for just three to nine months.

"Working on a dairy farm, it takes a week to learn how to milk the cows, and several months to learn how to milk the cows well," she says. "So if it takes you [as a volunteer] three months to learn how to milk the cows well, the dairy staff has put a lot of time into you and gotten little out of you. If you work for a few years, you contribute much more to the farm. It takes time to learn how to do these jobs well. When the volunteers finally learn, they leave."

The kibbutz is also providing volunteers with accommodation and food, which of course costs the kibbutz money. And unlike paid workers, volunteers aren't working overtime.



YOAV ZIV, an Israeli volunteer, says there are no hard rules at the kibbutz. ‘No one will tell you that what you’re doing is wrong, unless you’re being violent.’



THE SUN sets on a typical collection of homes in Samar. (Marjorie Strom)

“There’s a limit to how much time you demand from someone who’s working for no pay,” says Strom. “They don’t cost as much as a paid worker, but they cost. If you were to do a very strict evaluation of their cost per unit of productivity, they probably cost about the same.”

Why has Samar kept its volunteer program, despite the economic pitfalls?

According to Strom, the volunteers bring much more to the kibbutz than a hired hand ever could.

“When you bring foreign workers, they live their lives, you live your lives, and there isn’t much of a connection,” she says. “They’re there to earn money and go home. You’ve got 10 to 40 of them living together on the kibbutz, they don’t want to eat in the dining hall, they want to buy their own food and cook the kind of food they’re used to eating. They’re not there for the social experience.”

There is also an ulterior motive for bringing in young volunteers.

“We bring to Samar people who we would be happy to see become members of the kibbutz,” she says.

CHOOSING COMMUNALISM over privatization certainly comes with its share of downsides. For example, a kibbutz that hasn’t privatized cannot get a loan or mortgage from the bank.

“It doesn’t fit in their protocol of what a mortgage is,” notes Strom. “I can understand that view on the bank’s end, but I don’t understand why the government can’t give the collateral.”

Samar also has access to fewer government benefits, due to its decision not to hire foreign workers.

The government currently has a program aimed at bringing Israelis back to agricultural work, offering special incentives to kibbutzim and moshavim that hire Israelis instead of foreign workers. But those benefits are only available to those that already have foreign workers, a condition Samar doesn’t meet.

So how was Samar able to survive the tumultuous fallout of the economic crisis that led so many other kibbutzim to abandon their original values in favor of their bottom line?

According to Strom, this kibbutz was always a little different. In fact, she rejects the idea that Samar fulfills the 100-year-old dream of the Kibbutz Movement.

“We aren’t the true kibbutz,” she argues. “I don’t like that terminology. We are nothing like the original Kibbutz Movement envisioned.”

While Samar has resisted the move toward capitalism, it has embraced individuality with wide-open arms from the very beginning – something the original kibbutzim did not do.

Samar, after all, was founded by young people who grew up on kibbutzim and wanted to create something completely different. They wanted the communalism, but not the rigid structure that characterized early kibbutzim.

“When Samar was being founded in 1976, we were the black sheep of the Kibbutz Movement. We were the bad kids rebelling against their parents,” says Strom. “On the traditional kibbutz, the most important thing was equality. People were constantly trying to ensure that everything was equal and that everybody had the same. There were committees and rules, and if all the houses were 60 meters and you wanted yours to be 70 m., you had to go to the committee to say you had these needs and you needed those extra meters.”

The founders of Samar were completely against that idea. They wanted cooperation, but with the individual at the center.

“It’s a basic social anarchy philosophy,” says Strom. “If you have a community of satisfied individuals, you are going to have a much stronger community. This was very revolutionary in terms of the Kibbutz Movement.”

That reverence for individualism from the get-go meant that when Israeli society began shifting its focus from the communal to the individual, Samar was already there. And while the privatized kibbutzim struggled to marry community with independence, Samar always had a strong combination of both.

“When we were being founded, the leaders of the kibbutz movement didn’t understand it,” says Strom. “Now they’re saying, ‘Hey, you’re on to something.’”

As for the economic instability that led other young kibbutzim into freefall in the 1980s and 1990s, Samar had more of a foundation to withstand those hardships, having been founded in the 1970s.

Samar also had an advantage over older kibbutzim, according to Getz.

On Samar, Getz says, “they are a first generation.”

Many of the members were around when the kibbutz was born, and thus subscribe to its founding principles. “The belief in what they are doing is based on ideology. Maybe in 13 or 14 years, when it’s the second and third generation, then the ideology won’t have such a strong hold on their way of life.”

Yet judging from the volunteers on the kibbutz, it seems that the new generation is just as committed to this hybrid of community, socialism and individualism.

“They didn’t try to create Marxist socialism here,” says Yoav Ziv, a 30-year-old Israeli volunteer. “They started on the basis that people are different and don’t always want the same things. People can have their independence.”

While we’re speaking, an illustration of that – and the potential downsides to it – plays out before our eyes. The volunteers are taking a break from work in the date orchard to relax and eat breakfast. They had been working since 5:30 that morning, and their break was supposed to last from 10 to 11 a.m. At 11:30, they’re still waiting to get back to work because one of the guys decided to drive away with the van they need to get back to the field.

Ziv isn’t really sure why his fellow kibbutznik took the van, but he doesn’t seem too concerned.

“There aren’t really rules here,” he says. “No one will tell you that what you’re doing is wrong, unless you’re being violent.”

As we speak, he takes a sip from my water bottle. He doesn’t ask, or seem to care whose bottle it is. To him, it belongs to everyone, or no one.

Of course, Strom and others on Samar don’t believe that their way of life is perfect, by any means.

“Hippie? Yes. Commune? Yes. Utopia? No,” she says, emphasizing that final “no.” “Would I say I don’t get pissed that people aren’t working as much as I think they should be? Of course I do. But they are probably pissed off at me about something else. But in general, I know everyone around me wants what’s right for me and good for me, even if we disagree on what’s right for me and good for me. Anyone who’s looking for utopia is going to be disappointed, because life has challenges. And if life didn’t have challenges, it would be really, really boring.”