

HAARETZ

From Cowshed to Synagogue Kibbutzim Compromise on Secular Identity in Bid to Survive

A tour of Israel's kibbutzim shows an increased Orthodox presence on the collective settlements, which historically always rejected an observant life.

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The synagogue at Kibbutz Yifat in northern Israel. Gil Eliahu

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The communal dining hall at Kibbutz Ein Harod received its kashrut certification two months ago. This happened after a bitter five-year struggle, with the opposition finally yielding to financial considerations. According to the ultra-Orthodox website Yom Leyom, “The kibbutz agreed to disconnect and cover its coffee-making machine during Shabbat. An approved hot water dispenser will be placed there for the Sabbath and holidays. A sign at the entrance will state that ‘According to rabbinical strictures, it is forbidden to take out or bring in food or utensils … a ‘Shabbes Goy’ [non-Jew] will register the people eating in the dining hall on Shabbat.’”

Ein Harod isn't the only place where this phenomenon is occurring. In recent years, Orthodox religious elements have made their way into increasing numbers of kibbutzim, often accompanied by bitter arguments and struggles. The driving force is usually economic. Communal dining halls want certification so they can host religious tourists. The same reasoning led to the encircling of swimming pools with canvas fencing, to allow for separate bathing.

Moves to set up Orthodox synagogues are usually led by newer residents, living in recently built kibbutz expansions. In one kibbutz, there is even a mikveh (ritual bath) in the planning stages.

One could argue that this is part of a natural process, in which kibbutzim are opening up to trends prevailing across Israeli society. But there are other agendas at play, too. For example, a nonprofit group called Ayelet Hashachar is assisting with the construction of Orthodox synagogues while trying to increase Judaic awareness on kibbutzim. Chabad members from Migdal Haemek are involved in one such case.

Chabad members arrive every Friday evening at the synagogue in Kibbutz Yifat, in the Jezreel Valley, accompanying a handful of kibbutz members in order to make up the requisite minyan (10 people attending prayer services). This arrangement has been in place for 10 years.

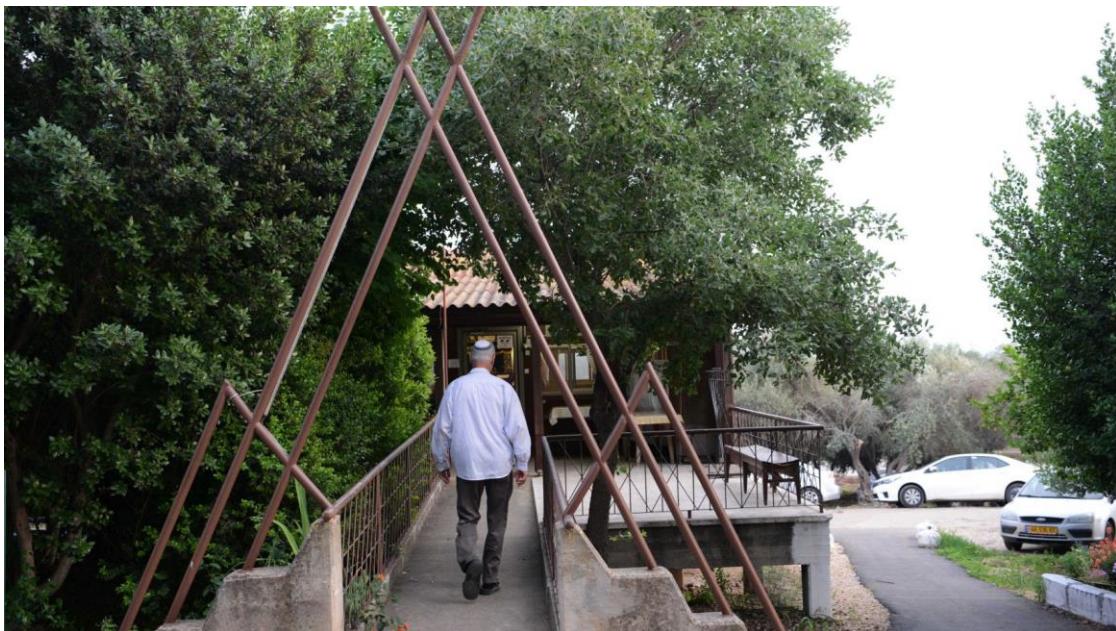
Yifat was founded in the early 1950s after the breakup of the Kibbutz Hameuchad movement. The movement didn't embrace secularism, just as the Shomer Hatzair kibbutz movement didn't. The synagogue was built in the early years of Yifat, but over the years the number of people attending it declined. A few members who wished to continue the tradition invited Chabad, which was happy to come – on condition that men and women remain separated.

Kibbutz members say that one male worshipper has refused to accept this, and to this day sits in the women's section. Every other week, a different kind of Kabbalat Shabbat ritual is held on the kibbutz. Eight years ago, kibbutz members Ran and Hadas Ron set up an alternative synagogue in the kibbutz clubhouse, and these ceremonies are held there every other week.

Secular stream of Judaism

From the very start, kibbutzim had a unique way of maintaining time-honored traditions. Shavuot became much more than a holiday in which one traditionally eats cheese products, and many Passover Haggadah books were rewritten by Kibbutz members, who adapted them to their own ideology. In one such Haggadah prayer book, a toast is made to "Labor Day and a life of cooperation."

Now these kibbutzim also have to agree to some markers of religiosity. Thus, in Sarid, a kibbutz founded in 1926 by the left-wing Kibbutz Haartzi movement, some new residents wished to build a synagogue. Kibbutz members and some residents of the expanded section objected. The dispute reached the courts and a mediation process is now underway.



The approach to the synagogue at Kibbutz Yafit. Gil Eliahu

One member said that just as the state respects the rights of religious groups, allowing religious communities to close their gates and prohibit transportation on Shabbat, so the rights of secular communities should also be respected, noting: “We see secularism as an essential stream of Judaism that should not be subjugated to Orthodoxy.”

She noted that the kibbutz doesn’t limit anyone’s freedom to worship, and that public buildings have long served as prayer locations or as places where religious events could be held. The request to set up a permanent Orthodox synagogue “harms our communal right to choose an egalitarian way of life, free of religion.” Her partner added that “the debate cannot be separated from its context. In Israel today, a synagogue represents racism, isolationism, xenophobia and exclusion of women. For me, the kibbutz is an alternative to all of that. It’s the forefront of liberal Judaism – a pluralistic and humanistic one.”

At Beit Alfa, the kashrut certification of the dining hall was accompanied by bitter internal strife. “There was a feeling that, in exchange for money, we had to do things that were contrary to our worldview,” says Michael Ofer, a kibbutz veteran. Kibbutz member Hagit Liron, who recently made a documentary called “The Kosher Kibbutz,” said that opposition to religion in the kibbutz was so fierce that up till the 1990s, there was a kibbutz rule that forbade weddings to be held under the traditional chuppah canopy. Today, she says, “the drama around [kashrut] certification remains only in the documentary. Many visitors stayed away because of this issue. At the same time, deep concerns about a religious takeover were calmed.”

Or have they been? Six months ago, a new member who had married a female kibbutz member opened a synagogue in one of the rooms of his home. Many religious people in the area came to celebrate the introduction of the Torah scroll. One member said it was slightly emblematic that this was happening on the first kibbutz established by the left-wing secular Hashomer Hatzair movement. “It seemed as though all the rules were broken. It seemed as if the locals were harboring a sense of Schadenfreude.”

Surrounding the pool with a canvas fence and setting separate bathing hours for men and women over the summer, when the kibbutz hosts religious groups, was accepted with more understanding. “What can we do? The kibbutz needs the money,” said Ofer, with another person adding, “The main issue is not one week over the summer but our routine – when on Shabbat we see people who look Orthodox operating a synagogue in the middle of the kibbutz.”

A former member of the kibbutz, Omer Einav, remembers the day when people in the dining hall would eat [non-kosher] sausage and cheese sandwiches, even grilling pork on Yom Kippur. His father, David Einav, a photographer who still lives on the kibbutz, isn’t concerned. He captured the Torah scroll’s introduction to the synagogue and finds it all of interest. “And we still eat pork on Shabbat,” he smiles.

In Kibbutz Eilon on the Lebanese border, things haven’t reached the courts – yet. However, a resident in the expanded kibbutz area says that after a decade of struggling, in which his attempts to erect a synagogue were repeatedly rebuffed, some residents are preparing to take the matter to court. He was a yeshiva seminary student in his youth and was looking for a way of life without religious coercion. When he arrived at the kibbutz, he says, “I discovered the other side of coercion.” For example, some people wish to pray, but the kibbutz makes decisions based on a majority. “Can one imagine people in Israel wishing to pray with a majority deciding whether they can or not?” he asks.

The proponents of the synagogue, he says, were willing “to make any required compromise, including building the synagogue outside the community or along its fence – as long as it wasn’t by the cowshed. The smell of cows and Torah books don’t go well together.”

Three years ago, the kibbutz decided – with a two-thirds majority – not to erect a synagogue, and that no further discussions would be held on the matter. A few weeks ago, there was another vote on whether to reopen the subject, and it was again rejected by a large majority.

Some kibbutzim surrender without a fight, though. At Kibbutz Kramim, established in 1980 by Hashomer Hatzair groups, a few religious families were accepted a decade ago and the kibbutz in southern Israel completely changed its character. It decided to make changes in areas such as ecology and cooperation between religious and secular residents. The kibbutz is now labeled a traditional-secular kibbutz. A permanent synagogue was completed 18 months ago and a mikveh is now being planned.

Dr. Zeev Greenberg, head of the department for human services at Tel-Hai Academic College, Upper Galilee, and a researcher at the Institute for Study and Research of the Kibbutz at Haifa University, believes “processes of privatization were more profound than their economic aspects. They included an ideological, societal crisis, a crisis of values.” He thinks the opposition is not to a synagogue per se, but is “an expression of tension between the old traditional population and the new one.”

Greenberg adds that it’s not the synagogue that really frightens the old-timers. “They’re afraid that eventually the road to the kibbutz and their store will be closed on Shabbat,” he says.