

## No More Bacon for You: Israel's Religious-secular Divide Enters a Kibbutz Kitchen

When hardcore socialists have to vote on koshering their communal dining hall, conflict erupts. A new film documents the struggle for the soul of secular Israel through the community's story.

[Judy Maltz](#)

Dec 09, 2015 11:14 PM



A screenshot from "The Kosher Kibbutz" documentary. Courtesy / Hagit Liron

Had the members of Kibbutz Beit Alfa been asked to vote on seceding from Israel, it might have gone down more easily.

But opting to kosher their communal dining hall and kitchen? For some old-timers at this staunchly secular kibbutz in northern Israel, that was too much to stomach.

To be sure, there were potential financial benefits in the move. Beit Alfa, the first kibbutz established by the hard-core socialist Hashomer Hatzair movement, had been struggling financially for years. By obtaining kashrut certification, it could potentially attract business from many of the religious groups that frequent this part of the country on organized trips.

But was that worth the price of selling their secular souls to the devil and subjecting themselves to the dictates of Orthodox rabbinical supervisors?

“Emotionally, I’m having a very difficult time with this,” confesses the straight-talking, chain-smoking supervisor of the communal dining hall, echoing the sentiments of many of her comrades. The complaints can be heard in “The Kosher Kibbutz,” a documentary by Hagit Liron that premiered yesterday at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival.



A screenshot from "The Kosher Kibbutz" documentary. Courtesy / Hagit Liron

The 55-minute film follows the members of Beit Alfa over several months as they bicker, often quite heatedly, about the pros and cons of going kosher. Much of the debate takes place, symbolically, around the long tables of the very dining hall whose future lies in the balance.

The issue at heart, as becomes clear from the outset, goes far beyond separating meat and dairy and abstaining from pork and seafood. For the members of Beit Alfa, at stake is nothing less than the future of their existence as a proud secular kibbutz.

In many ways, the story of this isolated community encapsulates some of the larger ideological struggles playing out in the country between religious and secular Jews, old-time idealists and young pragmatists, and supporters and opponents of free-market capitalism.

Lest he be considered suspect, an outspoken advocate of the kosher-kitchen initiative reminds his comrades that he was always the first to get the Yom Kippur barbecue festivities going each year. “There is only one reason to do this,” he declares, “and it is economic.”

Not to be outdone, an opposition leader waves his genealogical credentials at him.

“I come from 10 generations of rabbis,” he notes. “But I have always believed it is incumbent upon us to shield ourselves from rabbinical influences.”

The ambivalent dining hall supervisor feels compelled to remind her fellow kibbutzniks what exactly is at stake if they go kosher — not only whether they can continue eating pizza “and maybe even borekas” with their hot dogs at lunch, but also whether they can continue taking their meals together on Shabbat, as they have always done.

“We can’t use the cash register on Shabbat if we want kashrut certification,” she says. (Like most kibbutzim that have undergone privatization in recent decades, Beit Alfa charges its members a nominal fee for food.)

The first outcome of the secret vote is 98 for and 88 against. But then some members get cold feet, while others argue that a decision of such great import should require a larger majority. So four months later, they go back to the ballot box. Only this time, the number of votes cast is greater than the number of kibbutz members.

So it’s back to the drawing board for a third vote. Finally, the yay-sayers get their big win, though nobody is celebrating. “This is a black day for everyone,” a kibbutznik carrying his breakfast tray tells the cameraman.



A screenshot from "The Kosher Kibbutz" documentary. Courtesy / Hagit Liron

When the kashrut supervisor and his assistant pay their first visit to the kibbutz, the ground is ripe for a clash of civilizations. A cigarette in one hand, the dining hall supervisor instinctively extends her other hand to greet the rabbi. He politely declines and instead reaches out to shake the hand of her male compatriot.

On their tour of the kitchen, the rabbi asks whether the kibbutzniks work on Shabbat. A kitchen worker in attendance almost laughs. “Why would we work on Shabbat?” he asks, as if the rabbi had suggested secular Jews weren’t entitled to a day of rest.

Among the most militant opponents of the kosher-kitchen plan is Sonia, a woman who doesn’t mince words. But as fate would have it, Sonia’s daughter has become observant after marrying an Orthodox man and is overjoyed to learn she will be able to take her meals once again in the communal dining room when visiting her family.

Her mom winks at the camera. “I’ll be honest,” she says. “When she’s not watching, I don’t always count the hours that pass when I give her kids dairy products after meat.”

While a team of young religious boys is busy splashing boiling water on the dining hall tables as part of the koshering process, old-timers gather outside to commiserate over one last meal of nonkosher hot dogs.

“For me, these are the last days of Pompeii,” remarks a burly white-haired kibbutznik.

A grim-looking elderly woman responds: “I wish they waited until I died to do this.”

Surprisingly, it’s Sonia who tries to make the best of the situation. “You know what?” she tells her comrades. “I would’ve been willing to eat kosher – but only if other things in the country were different.”



[Judy Maltz](#)

[Haaretz Correspondent](#)