

Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek at 96

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Kibbutz Mishmar HaEmek, mid-1930s and right: □ the new neighborhoods as seen from the air in more recent times, older part in the forested area

This month (January 2018) the Jezreel Valley kibbutz of Mishmar HaEmek in the lower Gailee, will celebrate 96 years since the founding members came to the Jezreel Valley, set up camp on land purchased from wealthy Arab landowners and began draining swamps, preparing the land for agriculture, breaking rocks to construct roads and much more - whilst at the same time also building a way of life still annoyingly referred to by some as an experiment.

They labored tirelessly under the relentless sun, suffered diseases spread primarily by mosquitos, lived frugally in every way, were housed (if one can use that word here) in tents and later on in wooden huts and built their first concrete building not for themselves but for the kibbutz children who lived under one roof, cared for and guarded by the community.

The children were the children of the community, of a collective with a very strong ideology, some of which for some eventually became unbearable, unacceptable and so they left. However, others from inside and outside the country joined, stayed and eventually built and developed together a strong, vibrant, multi-cultural community that is uniquely Israeli.

The children of those 1920's pioneers are today in their late 80s and early 90s, themselves grandparents and great-grandparents. A large percentage of the present day youth of the kibbutz choose to make this kibbutz their home after serving in the army, travelling abroad to see what's what elsewhere in the world, returning to the fold to study, settle down, contribute to the vibrant kibbutz community and build a family of their own.

Although born in Britain, I have been a member of Mishmar HaEmek for almost 50 years. It is here that I and my late husband raised our 5 children in what was then a system of education where the kibbutz kinder still lived in children's houses and not with their parents – but important to add they spent 4 hours every afternoon with their parents. For many reasons this system of child rearing in some of the kibbutzim petered out by the beginning of the new millennium which was also a time that better, read as bigger, housing became available to the members in my kibbutz and more suitable for what would be deemed more 'normal' family life.

Not all kibbutzim reared their children in this fashion, different movements having very

different takes on many aspects of their particular collectives, ranging from education, politics, and religion to name the main ones. The last kibbutz to dispense with the old style rearing of kibbutz children was Baram perched on the Lebanese border and I always had thought that Mishmar HaEmek, a stickler for many aspects of the old ideology until today, would be taking that title!

Until relatively recent years people worked where it was necessary and not necessarily where they wanted to work. The kibbutz of the 1960s I was first introduced to, agriculture was the main source of income but the industry quickly expanding. Therefore, the choice of work places was somewhat limited, mainly restricted to the extensive citrus and non-citrus fruit orchards, field crops, dairy and beef herds, extensive chicken farm and hatchery among others.

The kibbutz plastics factory was founded in the 1950s, originally in order to give older members less physical work out of the elements, but by the end of the 1960s already developing greatly and not only in need of more working hands but also a need for engineers and the like - opening up the doors for studies that had been limited until that time. Then of course, servicing the needs of the community itself meant many jobs in the care and education of the kibbutz kinder from birth to high-school as well as serving the community's needs in the kitchen, dining-room, laundry, clinic and so on.

Over the five decades I have lived in this kibbutz, founded by Polish Zionist, secular, socialist Jews belonging to a movement known as Hashomer Hatzair, our industry (TAMA Plastic Industries) has become a world leading manufacturer of crop packaging products combining a few generations of farming experience with cutting-edge agricultural technology for farmers around the globe.

Four of my five children (all of who married and with children of their own) live in Jezreel Valley kibbutzim, two are in Mishmar HaEmek, and one each in Megiddo and Ein Harod. Unfortunately another has lived the last 15 years in a very different valley, that of Los Angeles!

The first kibbutz was founded in 1909 when the country was part of the Ottoman Empire and obviously although the kibbutz of today is far removed from the kibbutzim of the Ottoman and subsequent British Mandatory Palestine periods, or even the first three or four decades of the State of Israel, kibbutzim still exist in various forms and although

many have turned away from the raw socialism of the past, they still remain communities with collective elements that imbue a sense of community.

Best described as co-operatives - or in 1960s terminology *communes* – the kibbutzim played an important role in the creation and defense of the State of Israel, contributed enormously to the building of Israeli society, the political and economic development of the country and far more, an incredible feat when taking into consideration that members of kibbutzim were never more than a very small percentage of the total population.

Although roughly two-thirds of the kibbutzim in Israel have decided over the last few decades to shed the old socialist model, Mishmar HaEmek is still one of those sticking to the basics. In other words, the around 560 members (with our children, serving soldiers, students and applicants for membership a community of around 1,000) receive the same annual budget immaterial of what job they do – whether inside the kibbutz or work outside of the community and their salaries paid into the kibbutz coffers.

Though still thought of as a ‘traditional’ kibbutz, Mishmar HaEmek - as all other 270 kibbutzim in Israel - changed drastically in the almost 50 years I have lived here. But then again, the whole world has changed and pretty obvious that if the kibbutzim had not been able to become far more flexible and adapt to the ever developing technology and life in the fast lane of the 21st century, they would have totally collapsed instead of searching for and creating various ways of maintaining a community related style of life that is still of a special character.

Generally situated in rural areas of the country, the high-speed development of towns and cities throughout Israel has placed, in some areas, the front gates of kibbutzim on the lip of new ‘city-slicker’ neighborhoods – whilst others are still rather out on a limb in underdeveloped areas, the latter mostly in the south of the country.

No new kibbutzim in the old style have been founded for many years. In present times young people who are members of Zionist Youth Movements in Israel and abroad are not attracted to the vast majority of the kibbutzim whereas in the 1950s and 1960s nearly all the overseas youth movement groups began their life in Israel together with their peers bolstering already established kibbutzim (often affiliated with their movement) and even founding a few new ones themselves in the early 1970s.

The nowadays privatized kibbutzim generally hold no attraction for Israeli or overseas youth making aliya (immigrating to Israel) but the ‘pioneering spirit’ of yesteryear still remains in various different types of communities with strong messages of contributing to society in general that have formed in the last two decades. Scores of groups, many also created or strengthened by young people from movements abroad, live together in a communal fashion among the weaker elements of society and are committed to working in the field of education in low socio-economic neighborhoods in towns such as Sderot, Migdal HaEmek and Kiryat Shmona to name but a few.

These pioneers of the new millennium whose grandparents – and in some cases great-grandparents – came to this land to drain the swamps, toil the soil and build a country for the Jewish people, are sowing the seeds of hope and determination for a better future among some of the weaker elements in Israeli society, of which unfortunately there are many.

Although it is only fair to say that Mishmar HaEmek today has become a wealthy community due to darned hard work, belief in an ideal and a proven capacity of pulling together in times of trouble (coupled of course with the outstanding success in recent years of TAMA Plastic

Industries) the strength of the kibbutz lays not in the extremely rewarding annual profit, but in the fabric of the people.

I for one am grateful that I decided, as a 1960s bit of a hippie, not attracted to the heartlessness of capitalism, joined a kibbutz where the majority of individuals have pulled their weight for a common goal – a kibbutz where the individual cares about, takes responsibility for and has pride in their community and where the community reciprocates applying those same values to the individual.

