Foreword

This book contains a number of articles and lectures, some of them unpublished, which I have written over the past two decades. Its title requires some explanation. It opens with a quotation from one of the few major philosophers who have dealt in depth with questions of community, or Gemeinschaft, and indicates both the importance of community as such in my philosophical outlook, and my intention of discussing it not only as an abstract concept, but as it is realized in the communal societies in which it “happens” – kibbutzim, communes, and various other types of intentional community. The main area of my past research has been the history of the kibbutz; this book is an attempt to view my findings, and those of others, in a broader, sometimes even a universal, perspective. As for “philosophy”, each of its classical definitions: a system of beliefs generally accepted by a particular community or group of communities, and the rational investigation of questions about communal life and thought, comes into play here. I describe various belief systems, and attempt to estimate their validity by a rigorous logical examination; I examine the changes in the meaning of various keywords in the lives of these communities; and I consider the ways in which communalists’ belief systems change as a result of encounters with reality.

Although, as I have remarked, the main field of my research has been the history of the kibbutz, summed up in my The Kibbutz Movement: A History,1 I have never considered the study of history to be only an end in itself; indeed, in my first book, The Kibbutz and Society,2 I expressed the

hope (largely unfulfilled) that my research would be of use in the rethinking of kibbutz ideology which, even at that early stage, I considered to be necessary. And it is significant that in this connection I mentioned the ideological aspect of kibbutz history; for the founders and leaders of the kibbutz movement – and, to a considerable degree, most of its rank-and-file members – were motivated by ideological considerations, which have influenced its development throughout the hundred years of its existence. Nor is it accidental that this book appears in a series on utopian thought and practice; for, as I claim below, the kibbutz has at various times been a pre-utopian, a utopian, and a post-utopian society, and this has been, and still is, a central factor in its development.

This book, then, is an exercise in the history of the kibbutz idea. But, in my view, although the kibbutz, its ideology, and its practice stand at its centre, this is not its only importance. Each of the main themes of the book is exemplified not only in the kibbutz itself but in many other intentional communities, and is often seen to be of universal importance. I have, therefore, used a comparative methodology to seek the idea of community not only in the kibbutz itself but “wherever community happens”.

By and large, I discuss what is becoming known as “the classical kibbutz”, as it existed before the far-reaching changes of the 1980s. This is partly because at the time when I wrote the articles presented here such changes had neither been executed nor, in general, even thought of. But it is also because I believe that the dust has not yet settled sufficiently on these changes for us to see and analyse the contemporary kibbutz clearly in the way in which I have dealt with the earlier period. And, in any case, that period stands as an independent example of ways and life and thought of universal import. In this respect, the achievements of the classical kibbutz may be compared with those of Athenian democracy at its height: the significance of both is most clearly seen during their period of glory; and most of the arguments presented here apply mainly, though not exclusively, to this period.

The first section of the book deals with a subject which I believe to be central to any theory of communalism: the communal experience. I discuss it in philosophical rather than historical or sociological terms, asking whether the conclusions drawn by communards from this phenomenon
widespread and often described, but never as often and as explicitly as in the kibbutz – are valid, and form a rational basis for a communal way of life.

The second section considers the kibbutz as a post-utopian society: the thought-processes resulting from the fact that pristine utopian ideals are never completely realized are described and analysed, and kibbutz post-utopianism compared with similar phenomena in the world at large.

The third section considers the kibbutz as a pioneering society, and analyses the development of the idea of pioneering (halutziut) from its biblical origins until the mid-1970s. Here again, the comparative method is used, and the Zionist concept of pioneering is compared with that of the United States. This section ends with a discussion of the pioneering Zionist youth movements. Though youth and youth organizations have been widely discussed in the research literature, there is no exact parallel to these movements, which not only recruited tens of thousands of young people for educational activities, but have played, and, indeed, still play a vital role in the development of the kibbutz movement.

Finally, under the heading “looking outwards”, I have included a chapter which examines the way in which kibbutz members have attempted to influence the world around them.

I have added an afterword, both as a summing-up of the main theses of the book, and in order to make some attempt at considering the relevance of the substance of the book, most of which deals with a past which will never be repeated, to the situation of the kibbutz, and of communal societies in general, in the realities of the twenty-first century.

It would be hard to single out individuals to whom I am indebted for criticism and discussion of the ideas expressed here over the past twenty years. They include my Israeli colleagues in the academic field of the history of Palestine/Israel; fellow members of Kibbutz Beit Ha’emek, including my late wife, Aliza; my partner Roberta Levin; and the members of the (European) Utopian Studies Society, with whom I have conducted a fruitful dialogue since 1989. All of them added to my understanding and precluded errors; though, of course, the text as it stands is mine alone.
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