In outlining a possible philosophy for a communal society, I began by emphasizing the centrality of the communal experience. I claimed that it is in itself sufficient ground for a social philosophy justifying the maintenance of a communal way of life like that of the kibbutz, though this view is not held in many societies which are superficially similar to the kibbutz. I added that communalism may lapse into totalitarianism if not linked to a firm belief in and practice of democratic values (see chapter 3). It is neither an expression of a universal “world-soul” nor of a series of face-to-face encounters; it entails a moral imperative which can be – and, historically, has been, and still is – a sufficient and, in fact, essential foundation for the existence of a kibbutz or a kibbutz-like community.

When such a society comes into existence, it can properly be called utopian, since it is the realization of the aspirations of a group of like-minded people. But no utopia lasts forever, and any such society will inevitably arrive at a post-utopian stage, involving a variety of reactions on the part of its members, but not shrugging off the effects of its utopian origins. I have given examples of post-utopian patterns of thought, both within the kibbutz and outside it. Post-utopianism involves the reference to a possible ideal state of affairs whenever a community undergoes, or is considering undergoing, a fundamental change in its way of life.

Most communal societies which have lasted for a reasonable length of time have set themselves goals beyond the maintenance and livelihood of their own community: some religious or spiritual, some political, some philanthropic. The kibbutz is an eminent example of this rule, which was expressed in kibbutz philosophy in the cluster of concepts associated with the term halutziut – pioneering – a concept with a whole array of meanings, ranging from service to the broader community to social and political leadership. In my analysis of this concept, and my description of the kibbutz as “a movement for social change”, I have outlined a vital aspect of
the kibbutz movement’s political philosophy – the varying concepts of the relationships between the kibbutz and the outside world. The dominant view, that of the kibbutz as a serving elite, led to a long-term contract with the Zionist and Israeli authorities, whereby it received financial, territorial, moral and political support without which it is doubtful whether it would have survived. And, conversely, in its role as a serving elite it provided support for the Jewish community in Palestine and in the early days of the state without which it is doubtful whether the state would have come into being.

Is this of any importance beyond the telling and analysis of history? The very fact that I have chosen to deal with philosophical aspects of kibbutz thought shows that I believe it is; for philosophical discourse is (or claims to be) meta-historical, and relevant to periods and places beyond those where it originated. And the background against which this book appears emphasizes its relevance; for the past three or four decades have seen an unprecedented growth in the number and variety of communes, cooperative communities and intentional communities, some with crystallized world-views, others “seeking their way” in a globalized environment inimical to the social and political philosophies presented above (Oved, 2009). If this book is directed to any particular address, it is to this growing protest movement of communities built by people who have chosen, as have kibbutz members over the years, to put their ideals into day-to-day practice.

Such communities cannot be called “communal” without the bonding ingredient of the communal experience. They will, no doubt, undergo the process I have described, from pre-utopianism through the utopian moment to post-utopianism, which involves the testing and re-definition of their original aims in the light of their experience; but if they reject any effort to make the communal experience a guiding principle of their community life, they will not be communal societies. Many of them will have aims and philosophies of life beyond communalism: religious, spiritual, political, ecological, and more. But if my arguments in the first section of the book are correct, these are logically independent of the philosophical basis for communalism grounded in the communal experience: ashrams, monasteries, churches and political parties can exist without any communal element;
and, conversely, a communal society does not need any of their doctrines to justify its existence, though they may certainly serve to strengthen it.

The first two sections above present arguments which can readily be seen to apply to any form of cooperative community. The third, which discusses the concept of pioneering, seems at first to be more specific to the kibbutz. As I have remarked, however, pioneering terminology can be interpreted to mean any aim which the community sets itself beyond the concern for its own livelihood and the maintenance of its social principles and structure. Its adoption within the kibbutz movement has led to a wealth of discussions and definitions probably unparalleled in any other communal movement; there, the intellectual energy devoted to pioneering in the kibbutz has been devoted to matters specific to the “external” aims of the community, whether theological, spiritual, political, ecological, or social. This is a field of endeavour logically separate from communalism, but, apparently, vital to the self-confidence and survival of many communal societies.

Chapter 10 deals with a matter which seems to be characteristic only of the kibbutz movement: its educational philosophy. Although other social movements have been largely composed of young people, the specific doctrine of the kibbutz youth movements – juventism – does not seem to be a feature of any of them. Nor have any, except those which maintain their own elementary schools (primarily the Hutterites and the Bruderhof) built any organization parallel to the kibbutz youth movements in order to ensure demographic growth. Their success has not led other communal societies to imitate them, and it seems that the number of adult recruits to the kibbutz has now settled down at a much smaller proportion than in the classical period. Its major present-day success in the kibbutz movement has been in the establishment of the “communes movement”, a numerically small but vigorous offspring of the main kibbutz movement. In the schools, progressive educational methods are finding it hard to hold their ground in competition with more utilitarian approaches. But, though it is not universally accepted by kibbutz thinkers, and scarcely exists elsewhere, juventist educational philosophy seems to be alive and active.

Finally, “looking outwards.” The most ambitious expectations of the social and political philosophy of the kibbutz, such as kibbutz holism and
its variants, have long been abandoned. Nor have its attempts to influence the political system on a broad scale been particularly successful. And this certainly applies to the communal movement in general. What remains is the attempt to influence outside society on a local level, by varieties of social and educational work, and by “radiating values” – showing, by being, that an alternative life style is both possible and desirable. All of this applies both to the kibbutz of today and to communal and intentional communities the world over. Whatever the doctrines avowed by these communities, they serve the double purpose of strengthening the community within and influencing outside society, albeit on a small scale, but often to a significant degree. This would seem to be a common pattern of thought and activity for kibbutzim and communes alike in the twenty-first century.

Thus, the communalist movement embarks on the twenty-first century with expectations diminished, but in the certainty that, even if it is no more than a relatively small movement of protest against a commercialized and alienated world, it will continue to keep the spark of human brotherhood, equality and mutual aid alive, and draw inspiration from the thought and achievements of its predecessors.