

Excerpts From:

# REFORM ZIONISM

**AN EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE**

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**Section 7 - The  
Reform Kibbutzim**

# Reform Kibbutz and Religious Pioneering<sup>1</sup>

What is the *potential* of the Reform Kibbutz to engage in religious pioneering by virtue of its being a collective community? I emphasize the word potential, because in actuality, the realization of that potential will be determined by the felt needs of the members of the kibbutz.

Martin Buber was one of the first to see in the kibbutz an expression of religious pioneering. For him, the collective commune based on mutual responsibility between its members, a strong striving for an egalitarian economic ethic, and the conscious commitment to create Jewish community, made it a potential framework for the achievement of dialogue, of the “I-Thou” relationship within a contemporary Jewish setting. Buber asserted in his *Paths to Utopia* that the kibbutz was an experiment that had not yet failed — i.e., the kibbutz had not succeeded in realizing its utopian aims, but it was still, in spite of the exigencies of everyday life, concerned with striving towards this goal. More recently, another kibbutz member, Muki Tsur, has put it succinctly: “The kibbutz is not an ideal society, but it is a society built on ideals.”

There are a number of reasons why the kibbutz has been chosen as the framework within which to attempt the realization of a new organic development within liberal Jewish tradition. There are a number of reasons why potentially the structure of the kibbutz as it has developed up to now makes it a possible vehicle for such development. Perhaps the most important reason is that insofar as liberal Judaism strives to evolve new norms and new forms for Judaism in response to the challenge of the modern age, it must have a community within which such a Judaism can be lived. The organic Jewish community within which traditional rabbinic Jewish community was rooted is no more. The basis for “halacha” (law) binding upon the community has disappeared. Without a community with norms binding upon its members there can be no halacha. The kibbutz represents one of the few viable contemporary frameworks of community.

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1. Third National Conclave, Garin “Arava,” 1976, published in *Reform Zionist Perspective*, UAHC Youth Division, 1977. p. 371.

## ***Dialogue in a Liberal Community***

The egalitarian nature and the comprehensive collective framework do result in ongoing interaction at various levels within a small community of people. In the social sense, this is an organic community. Interpersonal relationships at work are inextricably bound up with interpersonal relationships outside of work. The principle of job rotation on the kibbutz — in particular insofar as elective office is concerned — tends to negate the formation of a power elite within the kibbutz. One's status depends not on the particular job that one does, but on how well one does one's job, whatever it is. This type of communal environment is far more conducive to the realization of a relationship of dialogue and the observance of mitzvot between man and his fellow man than the fragmented human inter-relationships which constitute the norm in the contemporary urban framework, whether in Tel Aviv or Scarsdale. The Reform Kibbutz will be the first community where a liberal interpretation of Jewish tradition can orient the developments in interpersonal relations.

The concept of mutual responsibility and community extends beyond the confines of the single kibbutz. In actual fact, all the kibbutzim in Israel are organized into networks of movements based on mutual responsibility and self-help among the 250 different kibbutzim. National and regional organizational frameworks exist within Israel to give expression to this principle. The Reform Kibbutz, therefore, by choosing the kibbutz framework, is automatically integrating into a national network of communal institutions based on principles of mutual responsibility and assistance. Moreover, the kibbutz movement sees itself as a movement in the service of the Jewish people. Indeed, every kibbutz is responsible for allocating 5% of its work force to service outside the kibbutz, either in the central institutions of the kibbutz movement, within the state of Israel, or within the framework of the World Zionist Organization. Hence, the kibbutz framework will make it possible for the kibbutz to always release some of its chaverim (members) for work with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (now a constituent member of the WZO). Of course, who and how many are released at any particular time will be the decision of the kibbutz itself. Practical difficulties notwithstanding (especially during the kibbutz's first years), the kibbutz tradition makes it "natural" for the Reform Kibbutz to be available as a resource for liberal Judaism.

## ***The Kibbutz As Potential For Developing Tradition***

To what extent can we be certain that the Reform Kibbutz will develop some kind of viable liberal Jewish tradition which can be instructive and perhaps even inspirational to the Jewish State as well as liberal Judaism in the Diaspora? In truth, there can be no such guarantee. It is true that to the extent that a Reform Kibbutz movement arises (i.e., more than just one kibbutz), the possibility for such a development becomes stronger. Nevertheless, it would be relevant to point out that the *potential* for developing such tradition is ultimately dependent on the existence of a viable multi-generational community. Tradition can be an organic outgrowth only if there is a continuity of generations within the same community. After all, the fundamental failure of all the nineteenth century utopias and modern experiments in communes has been their failure to motivate the next generation to carry on with their particular way of life. This, then, is the iron test. Will the Reform Kibbutz be able to propagate itself over a period of generations? Without this there can be no development of organic tradition. Given the social ability to “reproduce” the development of such tradition is not yet guaranteed, but becomes potentially possible.

In general, the kibbutzim, since their establishment some 70 years ago, have succeeded in “reproducing themselves.” There are fourth-generation kibbutznikim. There are kibbutz great-grandparents living together with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in the same community. In a way, the kibbutz, which in fact sees itself as a kind of an extended family framework, has also succeeded in recreating a traditional family framework within the context of a modern economy and society. The development of the nuclear family, the great geographic mobility, the lack of on-going contact with natural surroundings, make it most difficult to develop Jewish tradition meaningfully. The kibbutz as a framework provides these attributes. The community itself constitutes a framework within which norms and traditions develop. The communal sanction ensures that these norms will be observed. Indeed, with the exception of a few islands of ultra-orthodox Judaism, Jewish community in which communal consensus truly determines individual behavior exists nowhere except on the kibbutz. The existence of such a communal framework is surely the pre-requisite for the development of norms and practices (a halacha) by which Judaism can seek to confront the Modern Age.

The rural ecology of the kibbutz (note: the kibbutz is a mixed industrial-agricultural economy today, but significantly, its ecology remains rural) makes possible the development of a cosmic relationship — a relationship to the natural

order as perceived in its totality. Here we have the organic-inorganic whole of one's environment as well as the dimension of time through which man and his environment move. Perhaps in this lies the possibility of the kibbutz developing a relationship to the cosmic; for a further development of those laws that have to do with the relationship of the individual and his community to God (*bein ha-adam la'makom*). This is an area in which the majority of the kibbutzim have not yet involved themselves.

### ***The Sacred and the Profane***

Only through community can we achieve a heightened sense of the separation of the sacred and everyday (*bein kodesh v'chol*). Only through community can one truly express the weekly cycle of work and Shabbat. Only by relating to the events in the annual cycle as a community — the same community in the same place year after year and generation after generation — can tradition with regard to the observance of holidays and festivals develop organically. The meaning of the significant events in one's life — birth, bar mitzvah, marriage, death — are quite different if they are marked by the same individual in the same community within his or her extended family. The nature of current middle-class Jewish urban existence fractures the underlying unity which, ideally, should link the significant events in the life cycle. The norm is to mark the life cycle events in different communities, with different friends, and in a context of cultural banality. Finally, the potential for a meaningful relationship to the significant events in the national history of the people to which one belongs will likely be greater when this relationship takes place in its historic homeland.



In summary, the kibbutz framework has the potential for contributing to the development of a liberal Jewish halacha — in matters of individual and communal observance as well as in the relationships between individuals, their community, and their people. It is for this reason that those seeking to establish the first liberal Jewish community in history chose the kibbutz framework. The young people undertaking this venture hope to make a vital contribution to a creative Judaism. Some of them are apprehensive with regard to their “historic responsibility.” There are no real precedents to guide them except one — *naase v'nishma* (we will do and then listen).

Hence the Reform Kibbutz is also one of the most exciting options for Jewish self-realization for young Reform Jews today.