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TAMUZ *URBAN COMMUNE*

None of the early attempts to create kibbutzim inside towns or cities were successful. As we have seen, the traditional kibbutz combined collective endeavor, communal living, and egalitarian principles with the ideal of pioneering, physical labor, and the redemption of the soil of the Jewish homeland. This fused into a compound that held together. In addition, it was clearly more feasible to maintain a communal group in comparative isolation. For these reasons, the urban communes in Israel were far less successful than the conventional rural kibbutzim.

Three urban kibbutzim in the suburbs of Jerusalem, Haifa, and Herzliya became ordinary kibbutzim that just happened to be located near towns (although two of them are now set to become urban suburbs again and make healthy profits in the bargain, as they are sitting on prime building land). A fourth was Efal, near Tel Aviv, and lasted until 1951, when its members went their own private ways. It has since become an education and research center of the United Kibbutz Movement. The latest urban experiment to disintegrate, Kvutzat Shaal, founded in 1968 by a group of eighteen graduates of the American Habonim movement in the new town of Carmiel, near Haifa, lasted less than four years before disbanding. However, four urban kibbutzim have now existed for periods of between ten and twenty years, which is a short time span in kibbutz terms but relatively long compared to communes in other times and places.

Because the new urban experiments are largely the creations of children of kibbutzim who have sought to correct what they see as flaws

in the societies where they grew up, these urban experiments may have a better chance of success than the earlier ones. In any event, they are interesting as living critiques of the classical kibbutz. Reshit, which was founded in Jerusalem in 1979, today has a population of around one hundred; the other three are about half that size. Their members recall the earliest days of Degania and the small *kvutza*. Certainly they contend with the challenges of living together in harmony, cooperation, and democracy in ways that modern kibbutz members do not even contemplate. At the same time, today's urban kibbutzim are creations of their time, contemporary not only in their locations, occupations, and structures but also in their communal ethic.

Not for them the sacrifice for the common cause, the subservience of the individual to the group, the personal deprivation for the sake of the superior communal goal. Today's urban communards are almost obsessed with their individual autonomy, their personal freedom, and their civil rights. For them, the communal life is, more than anything else, a means to greater personal freedom and fulfillment. It is not that they are unaware of the society around them—quite the reverse: they are making supreme efforts to reach out to the populations of the towns where they live. Their involvement and interaction with Israeli society at large for the most part preceded similar attempts by the conventional kibbutzim, but where the traditional kibbutz aimed to lead the Zionist enterprise, the modern urban kibbutz aspires to create a superior quality of life for its members, while making a contribution to the quality of the surrounding society.

Kibbutz Tamuz was founded twelve years ago in Beit Shemesh, a small town near Jerusalem. Its name derives simply from the fact that the first group settled there in the Hebrew month of Tamuz, which usually corresponds to June or July. A brief explanation of the decision-making process at Tamuz, written by one of its members, Yiftah Goldman, throws considerable light on the purposes and aspirations of this comparatively new creation: "Tamuz is a new type of community," he writes. "The freedom of man must be expressed in every moment of communal life."

He goes on to discuss the inherent tension between the individual and society. Any social framework presents a problem for human freedom, he concedes, but a person cannot be free outside society, so he must strive to create his community as a free society. Democracy is not merely a question of the rights of the individual but involves his active participation in running the community. The "democracy of participa-

tion" does not cancel the rights of the individual, but it is not satisfied merely with those rights. Tamuz does not have a formal structure but makes decisions in various forums, almost never involving votes:

In Tamuz we see the general meeting as a creative framework, during which the members express their views, discuss the views of others, and change their minds during the course of the dialogue. The test of the community is to what extent it can reduce confrontation in the general meeting and create partnership.

At Tamuz the individual makes his own decisions about his personal life. In contrast to the traditional kibbutz, there are no committees making decisions for him. On the other hand, Tamuz does not adopt the classical liberal approach that an individual is free to do as he wants provided he does not harm others.

Quoting John Donne that "no man is an island," Goldman argues that every action that individuals take impacts on their fellow humans and that this is even more the case in a communal society like Tamuz than in society at large. The Tamuz principle states, "Everyone makes his own decisions about his private life, *despite* the fact that these decisions have a general effect."

Tamuz, as a community, does not try to evade the complexities of this situation. The fact that individuals make the final decision about their own lives does not absolve them from discussing the matter with their comrades, who are their colleagues, advisers, and partners in discussion:

The system at Tamuz is based on mutual trust. It is axiomatic that every member wants what is best for the community, but it is also assumed that the community aims to benefit the individual member. The members believe that the two things are interdependent. This sort of trust is not something that be taken for granted but has to be worked for all the time.

The commune has deliberately refrained from establishing control mechanisms, which are based on the assumption that people try to take advantage of each other and must be prevented from doing so. The Tamuz assumption is that, given the opportunity, people prefer a life based on trust and partnership, than one based on exploitation and deceit. In the absence of control mechanisms, continuous dialogue between the members is maintained.

The community holds weekly general meetings, both for practical decision making and for discussion of principles and general problems. Sometimes the general meeting is broken up into smaller discussion groups. Votes are almost never taken, but decisions are not made by consensus, either, which is regarded as a "relative majority." Instead, the members try to reach a sense of the feeling of the meeting.

Explaining why each voice is not necessarily equal, Goldman gives the example of a group of actors putting on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The actress playing Lady Macbeth may ask her fellow actors whether she should play her as a victim or a monster, and although she may be influenced by their advice, she will make the ultimate decision, as she is the one who is going to have to face the audience. So there is nothing sacred about the majority. On the contrary, the opinion of the person responsible for carrying out the decision has more weight than the views of the other participants in the discussion.

There are also discussion groups on a range of topics, such as the celebration of festivals or the children's education. When personal problems are discussed, it is usually in these smaller frameworks. If, for example, a member wants to go abroad and needs financial assistance from the community, this will usually be discussed and approved by three or four members, without the need for confirmation by the general meeting.

In addition, Tamuz holds seminars every two months for longer discussions (up to ten hours) on general topics, such as Israeli society, culture and education in the community, and the connection between kibbutz and town. Apart from giving the members the time to discuss these more complex issues, the seminars are seen as a further opportunity for personal contact among the members.

Goldman acknowledges that the Tamuz system places extraordinary pressure on the members. In the absence of formal frameworks or control mechanisms, the responsibility lies with the individual. Members decide what tasks and duties to assume, and they are responsible for a host of daily decisions that affect their fellow members. Because of the pressure, it is accepted at Tamuz that a member may want to take "time out" from the community, withdraw for a limited period from all responsibilities, stop coming to meetings, and even avoid social contact with others.

The danger that the Tamuz system will break down is frankly laid out. Possibly they are trying for too much, admits Goldman. In an aggressive, competitive society, the attempt to live by the principles of

partnership, trust, and responsibility may simply be unrealistic. Alternatively, the community might be maintained by strong ideological motives at the expense of the individual. Goldman warns:

We have known communities where members have denied themselves for the good of the cause or the idea. The Tamuz principle cannot allow a solution of that sort. Our community must enlarge personal freedom, not limit it. It must make our members' lives richer, more varied, more interesting, more satisfying. A life of asceticism, life based on self-denial for the sake of the ideal, is not a life of freedom.

Tamuz is not looking for harmony or permanence. It has to be a dynamic and developing society, always changing and aware of its weaknesses and problems. There are disagreements, grudges, feelings of anger and frustration, he admits, but they do not harm the essential solidarity.

Meeting Yiftah Goldman, one is at once struck by the contrast between the man and his writing. Not that he is not serious. Slight, sensitive, bespectacled, he takes life very seriously indeed, as befits a philosophy lecturer at Tel Aviv University; but his conversation is full of humor.

"I don't want you to get the false impression that everything is all sweetness and light," he tells me. "Last night at the general meeting one of the members annoyed me so much I could have happily strangled him, but this morning he asked me if I'd take his kids to school, and of course I agreed."

Yiftah grew up at Yotvata, a large, successful kibbutz in the Arava Valley in the far south of the country. Yotvata is a classical kibbutz in the tradition of Hatzerim and Maagan Michael. Yiftah says that he still loves and respects the kibbutz but feels something else is needed, "alongside Yotvata, not instead of it." In the old days, he notes, there were many forms: the *kvutza*, the large kibbutz, the Labor Battalion, the *moshav*. It was only later around the 1940s and 1950s that kibbutzim became uniform and institutionalized. He thinks that the diversity of the early days should be reproduced.

Yiftah had always assumed that he would return to Yotvata. However, between leaving school and the army, he joined a group of kibbutz-born youngsters working as youth leaders. They went into the army together and began to discuss a common future during their military service. Some members thought they should return to their own kibbutzim;

others thought they should found a new kibbutz; a majority began to consider linking up with an urban kibbutz. What attracted them to Tamuz (then just starting out) was its liberal ideology, and in particular its positive attitude toward the individual. Yiftah gradually realized that he had much more in common with his fellow soldiers than with his friends back at Yotvata.

"It wasn't just the people of my own year," he recalls, "but the whole young community at the kibbutz. I simply didn't have anything to talk to them about. We lacked a common language."

Shortly after completing their military service, Yiftah and his comrades joined Tamuz, which, starting with nine members in 1987, had grown to fifteen. At first the new group maintained its independence, pooling its members' money separately from Tamuz, but by the end of the year most of them had joined the kibbutz on an individual basis.

Eran joined Tamuz a few years later. He is a physical education instructor, who grew up at Ein Harod, the first large kibbutz. His wife Hila, a special education teacher, is from a *moshav*. Eran was very sure that he did not want to return to Ein Harod after his army service. In his view, any child born on a conventional kibbutz has to "find his own corner" if he wants to become a member; he did not find his. Initially, although Eran and Hila came to Tamuz for the prosaic reason that a former classmate of Eran's, who was living there, told them they could rent an apartment cheaply, they found the combination of urban kibbutz and development town fascinating.

"It was rather like going back to my prearmy days, when we lived as a group of youth leaders," says Eran. "It was strange at first, with general meetings called to discuss every small matter."

He finds it much more satisfying than the brand of communal life in which he grew up. At Ein Harod everything was clearly laid out. If he had returned home, he would have gone to work in one of the branches of the kibbutz, and maybe in time he would have become the head of that branch. The horizons were limited. In Tamuz he finds tremendous scope for being really involved, while at the same time maintaining his individuality. There is far more consideration of the needs of the individual than at Ein Harod.

Yiftah acknowledges that Tamuz can only work on a small scale. In his opinion, if Tamuz grows to one hundred members, it should split into two units of fifty, and he believes that even fifty might be too large. Currently, the kibbutz has thirty-three members, two families who may become candidates, and three resident students. The students are eco-

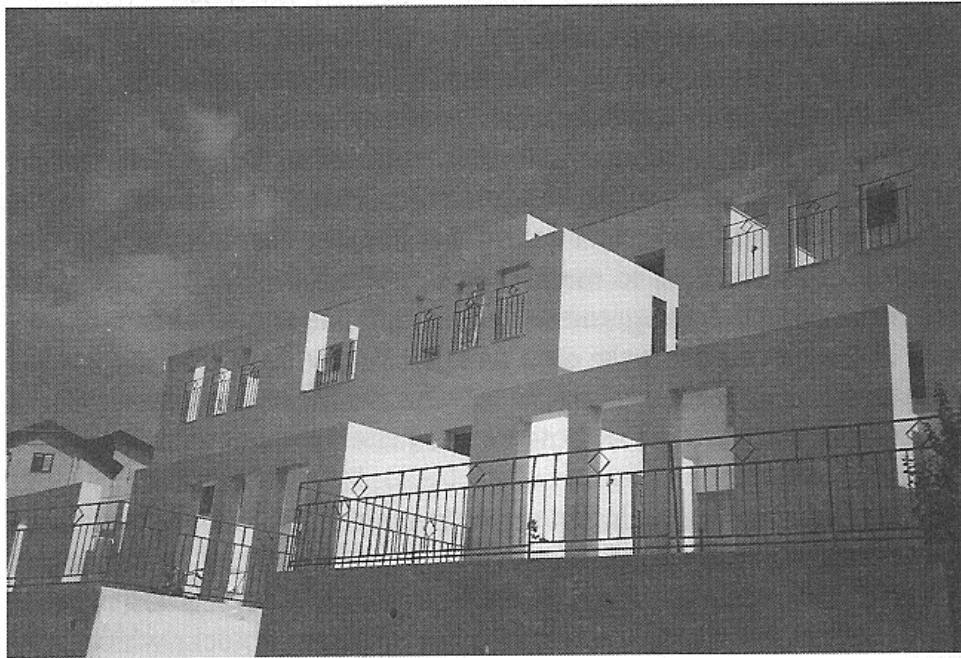
nomically independent and can choose their own degree of involvement in the community's social and cultural life. Two of them participate very fully; the third is simply a tenant.

Tamuz owns no cooperative enterprises, and each member is responsible for his or her own work. Aside from that, Tamuz operates in traditional kibbutz economic format, with seven collectively owned cars; the pooling of salaries; the joint financing of education, health, transportation, and phones; a communal laundry service; and the distribution of allowances to members on the basis of family size. One member, a computer programmer, explained that he had taken employment in the private sector to earn a higher salary. Despite the fact that the earnings are pooled, there is still the desire on the part of some members to feel they are making an adequate financial contribution to the kibbutz.

Tamuz members maintain separate households but enjoy a communal Sabbath meal together every Friday night. They celebrate the Jewish festivals as a group, in the kibbutz secular tradition. On my first visit, I found the kibbutz in a run-down apartment block, which they rented. There was absolutely nothing that indicated the existence of a communal society. Two of the apartments were adapted as kindergarten and day care center, the shelter was refurbished as a communal dining hall and meeting place, but none of this is visible. Since then they have moved to a building specially designed for the kibbutz. The members have bought their new apartments on an individual basis, with the intention that if anyone leaves, that member will sell his or her apartment back to the kibbutz.

So far sixteen units have been constructed. The pleasantly proportioned cubes are positioned in a manner that allows more green areas than usual at the expense of parking lots. They own only seven cars among them, whereas a similar group of people living privately would have between sixteen and thirty vehicles.

Erez took over the project from his wife, Adriana, when she gave birth. He points to the public terraces, overlooking what will be shady green lawns. Each apartment also has its own private terrace, which interconnects with its neighbor. Sixteen apartments are not enough for the current members, bearing in mind that they also need to accommodate their communal dining hall, kindergarten, day care center, and communal laundry. So they have rented six more apartments in the vicinity. They have acquired more land for later stages. They intend to sell six apartments to people who want to be associated with the kibbutz

Figure 11.1. New apartments of Kibbutz Tamuz in 1999.

Source: (Daniel Gavron)

without becoming full members. At a later stage they will construct an additional twelve apartments.

Ram Carmi, the architect who designed the Israeli Supreme Court building in Jerusalem, was struck with the concept of an urban kibbutz and volunteered his services at a greatly reduced fee. A former kibbutz member himself, Carmi sought to find a way of expressing the communal idea architecturally, something he thinks rural kibbutzim have not achieved. In any case, it was not practical to reproduce the rural kibbutz pattern in town. He looked to the medieval monastery for his inspiration, which in his view was the archetypal self-sufficient community. Although the basic concept is Carmi's, the actual plans were done by three young architects of the Stav Company who designed the individual apartments along a central "spine" that gives access to the communal activities. The idea was to find a compromise between the desire of the kibbutz to be part of its urban environment, while remaining a distinct community. The first impressions of the Tamuz members are mostly positive. Even the critics concede that they are happy in the pleasant apartments. On the theoretical level, though, there are dissenting voices. Some of the members say they

would have been happier with a less ambitious, more functional design, with more emphasis on living space and less on esthetics. They are concerned that the striking buildings may not fit in to the local neighborhood and hope that the ostentatious exterior will not elicit envy from their fellow citizens. It should be pointed out that the communal building accommodating the central hall, classrooms, kindergartens, day care centers, and other facilities has not yet been built; the architects say it will not be possible to assess the success of their concept until it is complete.

Beit Shemesh is situated in the Judaean hills eighteen miles west of Jerusalem. It was established in 1950 as one of the two dozen "development towns" built in Israel to absorb the mass immigration after the establishment of the state. Not very successful in its early years, with a higher-than-average unemployment rate, it has nevertheless grown to a community of some thirty thousand. In recent years, many people who work in Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv area and cannot afford the rents in those cities have made their homes there.

Tamuz was located deliberately in Beit Shemesh, with the idea of making a contribution to the community there. From the outset, the kibbutz engaged in educational projects in the town and admitted their neighbors' children to their kindergartens and day care centers. The members also ran adult education projects in the town. Two years ago, Tamuz established an official nonprofit association, the Center for Cooperative Learning, to facilitate its educational work in the town. One of the members, Osnat (Ossie) Elnatan, works full-time at the center.

Ossie grew up in Tel Aviv and joined the Reform Judaism Movement, which is relatively new in Israel. She served in the Nahal army unit at Kibbutz Yahel in the Arava Valley in the south. At twenty-four she joined nearby Lotan, where she married Hanan, a son of Kibbutz Mishmar Hanagev. They lived at Lotan for twelve years, before leaving three years ago. They decided that, with only fifty members, the desert kibbutz did not have an assured future.

They looked for a way to preserve both their communal lifestyle and a practical expression of their Reform Judaism. They first considered Hatzerim but (surprisingly) came to the conclusion that even that notably successful enterprise did not have a future as a kibbutz.

"Only the founders really believe in the kibbutz way of life," she affirms. "I think that when the next generation takes over at Hatzerim, it will stop being a kibbutz. It will become privatized, and that will be the end of the story."

So Ossie and Hanan decided to try Tamuz, admittedly much smaller and less obviously secure than Hatzerim, but also “with fewer pretensions.” It was quite difficult to become absorbed into Tamuz, she admits. They had been members of the founding group of Lotan, and Ossie was successively farm manager and the head of various agricultural branches, but in Tamuz they were newcomers and it was not easy. They had another child, which helped weld them to the group. Ossie also took an undergraduate degree in economics at Ruppin and began studying for her master’s in Judaic studies at the Shechter College in Jerusalem.

They miss Lotan, she admits. Their eldest child goes back often, and children come from Lotan to spend vacations with them in Tamuz. She sees nothing strange in opting for Tamuz even if it will only last for one generation. It is worthwhile in itself. People tell her that they have taken the bad things from town and kibbutz: they have to give in their salaries and do not even gain the benefit of a green rural environment.

“I think it is the *best* of both worlds,” she says defiantly. “We live communally and also play our part in Israeli society.”

She is certain that Tamuz exerts an influence. She does not know how much, but it does impact on the town of Beit Shemesh. Its Center for Cooperative Learning has a twin focus she explains: pluralistic Jewish education and community service. Their Beit Midrash consists of adult classes one day per week from September to June. They teach Bible, Talmud, local geography, and Jewish history and culture from a non-Orthodox point of view. Most of the students are local teachers, with a sprinkling of older people. There were twenty-seven students in 1999 and forty registered for 2000. In addition, they organize adult evening classes and enrichment programs for children, including assistance with homework. There is also a group of children with special needs, who have sports activities, hobby groups, special classes, and are served meals.

“For me, the involvement in Beit Shemesh is no less important than the communal life,” says Ossie. “We have founded a Women’s Council in Beit Shemesh to advance the cause of women. At present, there is only one woman on the municipal council, and we aim to improve that. The Women’s Council is a personal involvement of mine, not an official Tamuz initiative.”

Hagar and Danny Elbaz, both in their forties, have purchased an apartment in the Tamuz complex but have no intention of joining the kibbutz. They are the first of an eventual six nonmember resident families, associated with Tamuz but not members.

Hagar was born on a kibbutz but grew up in Jerusalem. She is a textile designer. Danny, who was born in Morocco, serves in the police. They lived opposite Tamuz and sent their youngest daughter to the kibbutz day care center. Later they became involved in activities together with the Tamuz members: parents' committees, education, local politics, and citizens' empowerment. Hagar feels she has a lot in common with the members of Tamuz. She and her husband very much want to be part of the Tamuz community and continue to be involved in education and social activism in Beit Shemesh. She is attracted to the non-Orthodox Judaism of Tamuz and plans to study this year at the Beit Midrash. She does not, however, see herself as a kibbutznik. She feels that the era of economic sharing is in the past.

"Anyway, I can't start this intensive communal living at my time of life," she says emphatically. "I'm not going to start going to general meetings to discuss budgets and so on. At the same time, we feel very good with the Tamuz members. We'll celebrate the New Year with them, Shavuot, and Independence Day—that sort of thing."

Although she feels a strong affinity with Tamuz, Hagar, who has been living in Beit Shemesh for sixteen years, thinks they have failed to become an integral part of the local community. Despite their genuine efforts and the many good things they have introduced, they are still not accepted by the locals. She is irritated by the sometimes grotesque rumors that go around concerning the kibbutz members—one of the most recent is that they do not have their sons circumcised—but she also says they do not always have the right approach to the local citizens.

She gives a recent example: Tamuz is looking for an administrative secretary for its Beit Midrash. They held a long discussion about whether they should employ a local citizen in her late twenties or thirties, or whether they should look for a young woman just out of the army, to whom they could better explain their aims. They decided to look for a young woman.

"They are so wrong," insists Hagar. "An older woman would definitely take longer to understand what they want, but she would be an ambassador from them to the town, just as I am. They need bridges of that sort. They want to be part of Beit Shemesh, but there is for all that something isolationist about them."

The Tamuz children go to local schools. The oldest of them are eleven years old, and they are beginning to form their own Society of Children entirely spontaneously. They have circles of friends in Tamuz and

beyond. Some of the Beit Shemesh children are joining in with the activities of the Tamuz kids.

"There is no question of educating them to carry on our path," says Yiftah. "They will do what they want to do, maybe with us, maybe not. Tamuz may well be a one-generation phenomenon. I am a bachelor and don't have kids of my own, but I don't mind what our children do. I hope they won't deal on the stock exchange or peddle drugs."

It is clear that, for Yiftah, the two occupations are only marginally different in their undesirability. In their almost casual attitude toward the future, we see a huge difference between Tamuz and the traditional kibbutz. The kibbutz was building for the ages. The members desperately wanted their children to carry on the enterprise and took enormous pains to educate them to this end. The Tamuz members are living in the here and now. They do not worry about the distant future and would not even consider educating their children toward any specific purpose.

The traditional kibbutz saw itself as an educational force, a blueprint for society as a whole. True, they were a minority, but they were the "pioneers going in front of the camp." One day the whole country would be one big kibbutz (Meuhad) or a network of cooperating communes (Artzi).

One of the founders of Tamuz did have that kind of faith. He thought that if they proved how well the new commune worked, neighborhoods all over Israel would form urban kibbutzim. The Tamuz members, however, have long lost any illusions on that score. They have no hope whatever of being a social example for the citizens of Beit Shemesh. They are more than satisfied if they can maintain good relations with the townspeople and make their contribution in the form of education and civic awareness.

In Yiftah Goldman's view, the secret of Tamuz is in its improvisations. Apart from the obvious differences—not owning assets except for homes, living in an urban environment—the main difference between Tamuz and the traditional kibbutz lies in its minimal formal structures. He also points to the concept of flexible membership. Like Hagar and Danny Elbaz, a family can decide the degree of its association with Tamuz.

The "constitution" is only activated if a member leaves the kibbutz. The Tamuz system, as we have seen, is based entirely on trust, and if somebody leaves, it may be a sign that the trust has broken down. In that case you need rules.

Although it is affiliated with the United Kibbutz Movement, Tamuz is much more like the sort of commune that can be found in most countries of the Western world: communities of idealistic people who band together to live a more harmonious life. This is not said in any judgmental way. There is much that is admirable in Tamuz, and its members are making a sincere and genuine effort to live ethically in a society that is becoming increasingly selfish and materialistic. They are also serving people beyond their own front door in a way that the traditional kibbutz is only starting to do.

Possibly the fact that so many of its members grew up on kibbutzim makes it more successful than other town communes have been in the past. They have a better understanding of communal life, more awareness of its opportunities and dangers. It certainly looks as if Tamuz will be a one-generation affair, and that is valid as far as it goes.