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The kibbutz comeback

After falling out of favour in the 1970s, Israel's grand exercise in communal living is more popular than ever. But does the new 'kibbutz lite' experience signal the end of the Zionist dream? **Laura Pitel** reports

In the open fields and olive groves of Israel, something strange is happening. The kibbutz, that grand exercise in socialism, group living and nation building, is filled with the patter of tiny feet. The communal farms, long beset by dwindling numbers, ageing populations and mountains of debt, now have young families queueing up to get in. Across Israel, the population of the country's 275 kibbutzim, as they are collectively known, has just reached 143,000. The figure is an all-time high.

Why is this happening? In search of answers, I went to Barkai, a kibbutz in central Israel that offers a microcosm of what is going on across the land.

Arriving late on a Thursday evening, I was welcomed by an unexpected sight. It was the Jewish equivalent of Valentine's Day, and the onsite pub had been transformed into a kind of romantic Israeli karaoke, with members taking turns to croon Hebrew love songs to piano accompaniment. The place was filled with young, successful thirtysomethings, with city jobs in business and high-tech industry. The bar served sushi prepared by one kibbutznik's Japanese wife. My images of sandal-wearing farmers and dope-smoking volunteers, it seemed, would have to be set aside.

It's not just me who was surprised by the new feel on the kibbutz. The community of 420 people would be almost unrecognisable to those who helped establish it back in 1949. Armed with a sole mission — to make the desert bloom — the young, secular Zionist pioneers adhered strictly to communist principles. All resources were shared. Luxuries were forbidden, and votes were taken on even the most personal of matters. Infants were placed in on-site children's houses within days of being born, where they were looked after in groups so that parents could be more productive on the land.

Today, new recruits can work in the big cities, keep their salaries and pick and choose the aspects of kibbutz life that appeal to them. Many have moved away from farming, turning instead towards technology and light industry. Most, including Degania Alef, the country's first kibbutz which started in 1910, have allowed differential salaries and ownership of private cars. Some have even raised capital by listing on the stock exchange.

Those that have maintained their old ways are almost exclusively the wealthiest ones: "those that can afford to be socialist", as one Barkai member wryly puts it.

The changes have their roots in the Seventies, when the nation's kibbutzim (the Hebrew for "gathering") took a downward turn. They began to struggle with debt, and the first right-wing government in Israel's history meant ▶