

The collective and the individual in contemporary kibbutz dining rooms

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ABSTRACT

The dining room has always been the pulsing heart of the kibbutz (Israeli communal settlement). Located spatially and symbolically at the center of the kibbutz, frequented thrice daily by most members and accommodating most central social institutions, the kibbutz dining room of the past was clearly the main hub of social life and the utmost expression of the kibbutz socialist and communal ideology. However, along with the profound ideological and social changes sweeping contemporary kibbutzim recently, the dining room has been deeply transformed. Based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in the dining rooms of three kibbutzim at different stages of privatization, this article follows the contested meanings of the dining room experience. Food and eating patterns are presented as expressions of hegemonic power structures, and their modifications as reflecting the changing values and power struggles within and beyond the kibbutz. I challenge the common understating of the “kibbutz crisis” as a consequence of the rise of individualism in contemporary Israel and argue that, along with the individual, the main competitors over kibbutz members’ loyalty are primordial social institutions, such as the family and the ethnic group, as well as modern socioeconomic allegiances. I conclude by highlighting specific qualities of the dining room as a culinary sphere that make it a privileged arena for ideological debate, resistance and change.

Since the onset of kibbutz life, eating together is a uniting element.... Whichever changes the kibbutz will experience, it is only reasonable to assume that the dining room will remain the symbol of kibbutz “togetherness” and the heart of hearts of any settlement that will remain a kibbutz (Maron, 1997:22).

...[M]any dining rooms were turned into full-payment cafeterias, often operated by outside contractors and their staff. The same principle applies once the dining room is completely or partly shut down and the family receives additional funding for its home-economy budget (Ben-Rafael, 1996:128).

The dining room is the pulsing heart of the kibbutz, the central institute where our “togetherness” is expressed daily (Kibbutz Yotveta Secretariat Report, June 30, 2009, cited in Garfunkel, 2010:74).

The dining room’s face is the kibbutz’s face (Nehama, 76, Kibbutz Mishmar).

Musing by the kibbutz buffet

In May 2006, I had an appointment with Jacob, the “community manager” of Kibbutz Darom¹ in southern Israel. I had just gotten a job at Ben Gurion University, and my wife and I were looking for a place to live. As I had nice memories of kibbutz life from my military service in the Nahal unit² some 20 years earlier, I suggested that we explore this option.

We had a pleasant conversation, which mainly concerned the privatization process the kibbutz was going through. We also discussed Jacob’s title. Originally, the position he held was termed *mazkir* or “secretary,” the socialist idiom for those heading a given political or social unit. While there were always a treasurer and a *merakez meshek* (farm manager) in charge of economic affairs, they were subordinate to the *mazkir*, who was clearly the head figure and main authority of the kibbutz. Jacob, however, held the title *menahel kehila* (community manager), an oxymoron representing the impossible coalescence of neocommunal and neoliberal agendas in contemporary kibbutzim. He explained that economic affairs were now handled by independent professional managers, either qualified kibbutz members or hired executives, who reported to the board of management and not to the *asefa klalit* (the General Assembly, the main venue of direct democracy).

It was noon and Jacob invited us to have lunch in the kibbutz dining room. So we climbed the stairs from the *mazkirut* (“secretariat,” which retained its old name) to the dining room. Stepping into the dining room, I was engulfed by nostalgia, as everything was so familiar: the large hall with its surrounding windows; the 360-degree view of trees, small houses, fields and azure sky; the stainless steel buffets; the humming of the large wash-it-yourself dishwasher; the groups of men in stained, shabby “working clothes” and muddy boots occupying some of the large tables; the schoolchildren eating together in another corner; the “white collar” people sharing smaller tables; the few young men and women who looked somehow European and

reminded me of the volunteers in my old kibbutz, though they were speaking Russian and not Norwegian; and, of course, the aroma: not of “mom’s cooking,” but of a large, busy, “no-time-for-nonsense” kitchen.

We approached the buffet area, picked trays and cutlery and joined the queue by the buffets. The first featured four trays of meat dishes: roasted chicken thighs, meat balls in gravy, turkey in red sauce and, to my pleasant surprise, fish grilled in garlic, rosemary and lemon. I was thinking that the variety and quality of food had improved substantially since my kibbutz days. Then I noticed that there was a small sign with two sets of numbers by each tray. When I asked Jacob about these numbers, he explained that the dining room was now privatized and the diners had to pay for what they ate. “This,” he pointed out, “was a very important step toward efficiency and saving, as the members think twice before filling up their plates, making sure to take just enough.”

When I asked why there were two sets of prices for each dish, Jacob added: “The lower price is for kibbutz members, whose food is subsidized. The full price is for the others.” He went on to explain that “the others” were mostly employees at the kibbutz’s factory and other hired workers, as well as *socharim* (“renters”)—people who rent a house in the kibbutz and purchase some of its services (mainly children’s education), but are not members.

We chose our main courses, which were portioned out by a dining room worker, and moved on to the side dish trolley and salad bar, where we helped ourselves to a choice of steamed rice, baked potatoes, boiled vegetables and a variety of fresh vegetables. Here again, there were two sets of prices for each item. I summed up the prices and figured that the subsidized meal was quite cheap, but the full price came to roughly twice and was actually not so cheap, with a full meal adding up to 30–35 shekels (about \$10), somewhat pricy when compared to similar meals in other institutional dining rooms and canteens.

We now followed Jacob and joined the line for yet another innovation (as far as I was concerned): the cashier. When we reached it, the elderly female cashier nodded toward us and asked Jacob: “Are they your guests?” Jacob responded agitatedly: “Yes, they are guests of the secretariat.” “The secretariat does not have a dining room account,” she responded. Jacob asked us to wait and went to discuss the matter with some of the diners. He returned, visibly relieved, and told the cashier to “just put it on the culture committee’s account, they’ll manage it....” The food itself was mediocre at best, just like I remembered it, similar in taste and quality to the fare in most commercial (and military) dining rooms in Israel.

While eating, Jacob reverted to our conversation on the privatization of the kibbutz and recounted how he proposed at one time that the “renters” not pay the full price in the dining room, but rather the subsidized price: “Let the renters pay the subsidized price,” I said at the meeting, “let us make them feel at home... after all, we want them to stay!” When I asked about the reaction to his proposal, Jacob said that it was turned down.

I found this lunch both disturbing and intriguing. I realized that the kibbutz dining room, which I remembered fondly as a warm space of commensality and comradeship, had changed dramatically. I also realized that, as an anthropologist researching the culinary culture of Vietnam, I was facing a new research field in which my interests in food, post-socialism and social change converged.

This lunch also touched on the main issues discussed in this article, which questions some of the ideological fundamentals of the kibbutz movement, such as solidarity and egalitarianism; points to the tensions between the collective and the individual in the contemporary kibbutz; and exposes some of the kibbutz power structures, relations and struggles. These issues are explored in the context of two drastic changes in the kibbutz dining room over the years: the shift from table serving to self-service and the privatization of the kibbutz culinary system. I discuss each of these changes as a major ideological shift, explore the power struggles that engulfed them and point to the consequences.

In the discussion, I argue that the most powerful competitor over kibbutz members' loyalty and commitment is not only individualism, but also primordial social institutions, such as the extended family and the ethnic group, as well as newly established class and socioeconomic allegiances. My findings therefore suggest that neoliberal processes of individualization may result in unexpected twists and allow for the (re)establishment of traditional and/or modern social entities. I conclude the article by highlighting specific qualities of the dining room as a culinary sphere, which make it especially prone to processes of social debate and change.

Food sharing: Commensality, contest and coercion

Kibbutz dining rooms were always hubs of commensality. Commensality (food sharing) and eating together have long been recognized by social scientists as exceptionally important venues of group consolidation (Sobal and Nelson, 2003). Simmel, in his "Sociology of the meal," suggested that communal eating was among the earliest human steps toward social integration:

We know of very primitive peoples that they do not eat at set times, but rather anarchically—eating individually whenever each person gets hungry. The shared nature of the meal, however, brings about temporal regularity, for only at a predetermined time can a group of people assemble together... (2000 c1910:130).

Audrey Richards (1939) also noted that the need to obtain food and process it foster and even compel social cooperation, an observation that was repeatedly reaffirmed in other contexts (Hawkes, O'Connell and Blurton Jones, 2001; Thiel, 1994).

Yet, food sharing is not only about inclusion. It also works to demarcate group boundaries and define exclusion. Mary Douglas (1975:66) pointed out that, while drinks are for strangers, meals are for family members and close friends. Davidoff elaborated that

who partakes of the meal, when and where, helps to create the boundaries of the household, of friendship patterns, of kinship gradations.... These eating patterns vary between and help to define the boundaries of classes, ethnic, religious, age, and sexual groups (1995:76).

While the daily home-eaten meal is the utmost expression of "being a family" (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Murcott, 1997), family boundaries are routinely expanded during feasts held at rituals, festivals and other occasions so as to include larger social circles, such as the extended family, the community or the clan.³ Taking part in such events and sharing the food serves as a "membership card" into the social group.

Communal meals are arenas where social norms and hierarchies are enacted and reaffirmed. A classic example is Richards' observation that among the Bemba, "the preparation of porridge... is the woman's most usual way of expressing the correct kinship sentiment toward her different male relatives" (1939:127). Thus, for example, the elevated status of men in patriarchal societies is expressed by their privileged access to the food and especially to meat (Adams, 2003; Fiddes, 1991; Herzfeld, 1985), while in societies or social echelons that adhere to other arrangements (e.g., matriarchal, bilateral, egalitarian, child-oriented), other forms of food distribution arrange the meal.

Shared meals, however, are also arenas for social contest and conflict (Bove, Sobal and Rauschenbach, 2003), where alternatives are suggested, negotiated, enacted and, at times, rejected. Thus, Richards (1939) recounted how in instances when Bemba women would dish out the porridge in a sequence that somehow contested their husbands' vision of the social order, these men would react swiftly and forcefully. In my own work on Vietnamese foodways, I highlight precisely these aspects of the culinary sphere and show time and again how the social order is not only enacted during the meal, but also subverted, negotiated and challenged (Avieli 2005b, 2007).

Finally, communal eating, and dining rooms in particular, might work as spheres of coercion (Moore, 1999). While food sharing apparently expresses intimacy, sharing and mutual obligation, dining rooms are also arenas where eating is managed, limited and, at times, denied. Indeed, regulating the food intake of others or preventing them from eating altogether is the utmost form of coercion (Counihan, 1998).

I suggest that, while much of the literature conceives of the kibbutz as a "utopia" (Blasi, 1978; Gavron, 2000; Spiro, 1963, 2004) or "dream" (Bettelheim, 1969; Leiblich, 2001), I believe that Goffman's (1968) concepts of "total

institutions” and specifically of “open social institutions” are disturbingly appropriate to some aspects of kibbutz life and particularly the dining room. “Total institutions” are social settings where individuals sleep, play and work in the same place, with the same co-participants, under a single authority and in adherence to a single rational plan (Davies, 1989). Goffman (1968) further defined a sub-category termed “open total institutions,” where individuals are relatively free to come and go, and all positions in the hierarchy are (theoretically) open to everyone.

The kibbutz is, indeed, a social organization where members live, work and spend their free time, and where an overarching ideology arranges most aspects of public and private life. Members are free to leave the kibbutz at will (though social sanctions abound), and the principle of rotation means that all positions are potentially open to every member, making the kibbutz a classic example of an “open total institution” (Goffman, 1968).

According to Clark and Bowling (1990), Goffman (1968) argued that one of the main mechanisms facilitating inmate management in total institutions is “the stripping of self identity,” which involves loss of personal possessions, intrusions of privacy and submission to demeaning practices. Goffman (1968) saw the dining room as a main venue for “stripping,” because inmates have no control over the choice and quality of food, are allotted limited portions, negated knives and forks, and must ask for their most minute needs (water or permission to go to the toilet). Inmates are often required to eat all their food and, if they decline, they may be force-fed.

If kibbutzim are open total institutions of sorts, the dining room is an important sphere of coercion. While the kibbutz dining room is very different from that of a prison or nursing home, some of the above attributes, in a diluted and mild form, can be observed, mainly those concerning free choice and autonomy. In fact, surveillance and oppression were mentioned repeatedly in my interviewees’ recollection of their dining room experiences, highlighting the coercive nature of this social institution.

I explore the kibbutz dining room from these three perspectives concomitantly. The dining room is presented as a main hub of kibbutz communality, egalitarianism and “togetherness.” On a more subtle (but not less substantive) way, dining room dynamics are shown to work as a means of social distinction and intra-group divisions. Yet, in specific contexts and circumstances, the dining room becomes an arena for social competition and conflict, where different social groups impose their own agendas and compete for power and hegemony. The dining room is therefore presented here as a dynamic and multivocal social sphere, whose analysis reveals the fundamental organizing principles and main tensions of the kibbutzim studied and the processes of change which they experience.

Researching kibbutz dining rooms

The data presented here is the result of anthropological fieldwork conducted in 2006–2009 in three kibbutzim at different stages of privatization: a fully privatized kibbutz, a kibbutz going through the painful process of privatization and a kibbutz that maintains its communal characteristics.

Many of the interviews and a substantial part of the fieldwork were conducted in Kibbutz Dagan, where I lived with my family for two years (2006–2008) and where we experienced kibbutz life in its worst moments: the year preceding *hafrata* (“privatization”) and the year that followed. We also experienced it from the “renters” perspective, which is unprivileged indeed. Throughout these years we ate in the dining room quite often. We regularly had our Sabbath eve meals there, and occasionally our weekday lunches. We also participated in some of the festive meals (Sukkot, Chanukah and Shavuot). I conducted dozens of informal conversations with kibbutz members and other dining room patrons regarding their eating experience and held several semi-structured interviews with specific members who worked (or had worked) in the dining room. I also conducted dozens of informal conversations with members of other kibbutzim and had meals in various kibbutz dining rooms whenever I had the chance.

To ensure that my reading of dining room dynamics was not biased by the sad state of affairs at Kibbutz Dagan or by my complex status as a “renter,” I employed a research assistant, who conducted participant observations and interviews in two other kibbutzim during 2008 and 2009: the fully privatized Kibbutz Mishmar and the fully communal Kibbutz Tipa. All three kibbutzim had been established in the 1930s–1940s and were relatively well off, so the state of culinary affairs was not the outcome of economic constraints, but rather a matter of choice.

Field trips to Mishmar and Tipa were made roughly once a fortnight, at different times of the day, and included participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with various diners and dining room functionaries. The data was transcribed during the observation periods and interviews or immediately afterward. Some of the interviews were taped and transcribed. Still and video photography were also used. The data was discussed in meetings held regularly after the field trips. Some of my preliminary findings were presented at an informal departmental seminar.

Some anthropological observations concerning “the kibbutz”

I shall leave the scholarly analysis of the kibbutz movement history and its recent socioeconomic crisis to those more qualified (Ben-Rafael, 1997; Gavron, 2000; Lanir, 2004; Spiro 2004) and limit myself to three anthropological observations compiled during fieldwork that are essential for understanding my main arguments

here.⁴ First, “the kibbutz” does not exist as such. My interviewees repeatedly pointed out that “each kibbutz is different” and that “in *our kibbutz* we do things this way...” (my emphasis). Interviewees also tended to point out how things were different in other kibbutzim. In such instances, the comparison was often accompanied by an observation regarding the essence of the difference. For instance, a hitchhiker from a neighboring kibbutz told me about Kibbutz Dagan: “Well, they have exactly the same food every Sabbath eve because they are *Yekes*” (German Jews, notorious for being particular, orderly and strict; see Zimmerman and Hotam, 2005).

This turned out to be especially true when exploring meal compositions, specific dishes and seasoning styles in each kibbutz. While the eating procedures were very similar in the three dining rooms studied, as well as in dozens of other kibbutz dining rooms in which I dined over the years, the dishes themselves varied substantially, as both choice and taste had to do with the ethnic composition of the kibbutz, with its ideological disposition,⁵ with historical events that left a culinary legacy and with specific people running the dining room or kitchen.

In this sense, Uri Ram’s (2004) distinction between structure and content in commercial culinary establishments in Israel is illuminating: while the professional culinary processes in most kibbutzim are remarkably similar, the food itself varies, with particular foodways shaped by the specific history, ethnic composition and other social and cultural traits of each kibbutz.⁶ While Ram explains this gap in terms of globalization and localization, I think that, in kibbutz dining rooms, it also has to do with the tension between communal ideology and demands made by local subgroups, such as the family or ethnic group.

My second observation is that the kibbutz movement has been structured since its onset around the irreconcilable tension between radical innovation and extremely conservative rigidity (Punch, 1974:315). In other words, kibbutz members have always been torn between the demand for strict ideological commitment and the fact that this very ideology is all about social change (Aviezer et al., 1994; Fast, 2000; Talmon, 1972). While the kibbutz project itself was revolutionary, maintaining the revolution called for extreme conformity to the new rules. The staunch resistance to change and the reluctance of many kibbutz members to rethink or reform social arrangements established early in the movement’s history, such as communal child rearing (Gavron, 2000) or equal salaries (Rosner, 2000), express the unyielding and even rigid facets of kibbutz life. A common complaint among my (mostly younger) interviewees therefore concerned the difficulties they faced when suggesting change or deviating from standard procedures. The term they used was usually *kashe* (hard/difficult), as in “it is so hard (*kashe*) to change anything here” or “people here are so difficult (*kashim*).”

This inherent tension leads to my third observation, which regards the “end of kibbutz.” Apparently, the most common prediction regarding this social movement is its imminent failure and cessation. As early as 1926, economist Franz Oppenheimer predicted the “immediate, inevitable demise” of kibbutzim (quoted in Rosner, 2000:1), while Ben-Rafael (1997:1) recounts how “Seventy five years after

the first kibbutz was established, it seemed that all efforts have failed to create communities based on sharing and equality.” By the 100th anniversary of the kibbutz, Gavron lamented that “The dream that began...with the establishment of the first kibbutz...is disintegrating...with less than half of the 120,000 members believing that the kibbutz has a future” (2000:1).

While these arguments are decisive and authoritative, the kibbutz is still around, and may be experiencing yet another period of revival (Adar, 2009; Hammershlag, 2008; Shani, 2009). In fact, in each of the three kibbutzim studied, plans were made for future development, which took continuity for granted (though there were explicit concerns about the nature of this future). I therefore think that instead of conceptualizing this looming notion of “the end of kibbutz” as a doomsday prophecy, it might be more fruitful to think of it as one of the kibbutz’s essential constants, an outcome of the inherent tension between the revolutionary edge of kibbutz life and the conformism demanded from its members (Talmon, 1972).

These three sociological observations—that each kibbutz is different; that kibbutzim are structured around the tension between revolutionary innovation and conservative conformity; and, as a consequence, that any change is perceived as “the end of the kibbutz”—are offered as a background to the findings and arguments presented here. Though I do point to common characteristics and processes in the three kibbutzim studied (and which may be applicable to other kibbutzim, too), my arguments should not be generalized and expanded without modification as, indeed, each kibbutz is different.

From table-filling to self-service: The first dining room crisis

The dining room was always the physical and symbolic heart of the kibbutz. Located right at the center of kibbutz grounds, usually in between the living and working zones (Chyutin, 1979), it was clearly the main hub of collective life. Most kibbutz members would frequent the dining room thrice daily for their main meals, and usually for one or more minor food events (wake-up coffee, four o’clock tea, night meals). As the central kibbutz edifice, it was the venue for the weekly *asefa klalit* (General Assembly), for the celebration of festivals and rituals and for any activity that required the community to assemble. The dining room was where communal life materialized most frequently and concretely and where communal ideology was endorsed publicly. Simon (56, Kibbutz Tipa) proclaimed: “The dining room *is* the kibbutz, *is* the ideology.... You come to the dining room and see the manager seated with the worker. We are all equal, all engaged. Here, there is really no making of impressions (*roshem*)—there is kibbutz.”

While, the dining rooms were modest structures in the early years of the kibbutz movement, they soon became the focal point of architectural attention and were planned so as to maintain and express the success of this utopian revolution

(Harpaz-Pomerantz, Livne and Almog, n.d.). Most existing kibbutz dining rooms were built during the sixties and seventies of the previous century, when many kibbutzim were doing well socially and economically. They are therefore large, imposing, modernist concrete buildings, with the dining hall itself usually located on the second floor, overlooking the kibbutz through its surrounding large windows, with most other important social venues (e.g., the secretariat, the treasury, the main billboard, the members' club, the canteen, the mailboxes, the infirmary) located on the first floor or in adjacent buildings.⁷

These new dining rooms were not only large, comfortable and luxurious (e.g., air-conditioned, equipped with soda fountains), but also planned so as to facilitate a new mode of dining: *hagasha atzmit* or self-service. As mentioned earlier, this meant that the diners queued up, picked a tray and utensils, dished their food from a buffet and then chose their seats. This mode of eating was very different from the previous culinary arrangement, termed *miluy shulhanot* (table-filling), in which each arriving member would take a seat by the table that was filling up, and food would be served and eaten only once the table was fully occupied. While self-service allows choice of food and company, table-filling facilitates neither.

The original system of table-filling was a clear enactment of the kibbutz anti-bourgeois ideology of extreme egalitarianism and asceticism: all members were equal, and food was meant to give them the necessary energy to work. There was no place or prerequisite for personal choice regarding food or companionship. Alternatively, table-filling could be read, as some of my interviewees pointed out, as an expression of the feeling among many members that the kibbutz was not an *alternative to family*, as often argued (Spiro, 1954; Talmon, 1972), but rather an *alternative family* whose members were all brothers and sisters and therefore may sit and eat with anyone. Both approaches can be discerned in Rachel's (73, Kibbutz Tipa) recollection:

We would come up to the dining room and you wouldn't have to think "who should I sit with?" You would just take a seat wherever there was one available. We were served some bread, jam, cheese and a pot of tea. We would eat and then we would all go to work.

This eating arrangement is remembered fondly by many kibbutz members. The book *All the Beginnings: 1937–1987*, dedicated to Kibbutz Ein Gev's fiftieth anniversary, recounts how

in the previous system, in which dining room staff served the food and demanded that members fill up the tables, members would dine with different members in every meal. With self-service, breakfast is almost a "permanent seating" affair, based on country of origin, work units and age; lunch is a job thing; and dinner is by families (Tzur, 1987:52).

Nostalgia aside, most interviewees were critical of the “table-filling” system. For instance, the tables were set up for eight people,⁸ and food was served by *toranim* (“shift workers”—kibbutz members who took turns serving food and washing dishes) only once fully occupied. This meant that the diners had to wait, sometimes for a while, until their table would fill up and food would be served. Thus, Yohanan (68, Kibbutz Tipa) commented: “What I found most disturbing was that a table of seven had to wait for the eighth diner to start eating.”

Serving food to whole tables also meant that members had to be considerate, patient, generous and careful not to consume more than their share. This, however, was not easy in the early years, when kibbutzim were poor, food was meager and unwholesome, while most members partook in extremely demanding manual labor. Hanna (74, Kibbutz Mishmar) reflected how “At first, there wasn’t much of a budget. You would come up hungry for lunch, but the rest would eat faster than you and get much of the food. It brought the beast out of the human.... *Busha* [shame/appalling]....”

And, of course, there was the matter of choice of preferred company: “What happens when a certain member doesn’t want to eat with someone?... or when I arrive with two friends and there is only one place available?” (Rivka, 54, Kibbutz Dagan). Under such circumstances, the tensions surrounding the need to wait for the table to fill up and to share the food were further exacerbated.

The shift to self-service was described by most interviewees as an amendment of the inefficient table-filling system and as a practical solution to the increasingly complex demands of the growing kibbutz population. Yael (62, Kibbutz Mishmar) said:

The kibbutz was getting bigger... we couldn’t eat all at once.... It was problematic and we had to find a solution. Self-service was a good solution because meal times were extended, people were more flexible with their meal times, and members did not come all at once to eat.

Arye (67, Kibbutz Yafit) told me how queuing up in the old, small dining room, especially on Sabbath eve, became extremely irritating:

You had to wait for your seat, then wait for the “train” of trolleys, get your soup, then wait again for the main courses and the dessert, and once you left, the table had to be cleared, cleaned and re-set, along with a white Sabbath tablecloth. People would have to queue outside and wait for a very long time, and in the winter it was really miserable.

Self-service was devised precisely to overcome such inconveniences, as timing became more flexible and diners did not depend so much on the schedules of the others.

Some interviewees even perceived of self-service as a strategy to save the kibbutz:

I insisted on self-service! True, it is not very ideological, but with ideology, we lose the young people. Life changes! It is not what it used to be for my father and grandfather. We had to move on to the next millennium with our kibbutz style (Shaul, 64, Kibbutz Dagan).

This restructuring of the dining system was not accepted without resistance. Some kibbutz members pointed out that they grasped this apparently practical change as a major ideological threat:

I knew that this was the beginning of the end. Everyone said: it is only for the good...there will be more choice...people will be satisfied..., but since the legitimization of self-service, where members sit wherever they like, there is no more "us." In my day, you wouldn't even drink a cup of tea alone—the members gave you everything (Dov, 76, Kibbutz Mishmar).

Yael added: "I knew this was the end. It started with drinking tea in your room⁹ and ended in a meal in which you are like a guest: you pick up your food, sit, eat and leave. You don't care about other members. It was the end of ideology."

Jacob (71, Kibbutz Dagan) explained: "When a kibbutz member chooses where and with whom to eat, the kibbutz loses its privileged status above everything else." Argaman (52, Kibbutz Tipa) asserted: "The buffet crushed us. Apparently, it was only an easier way to eat, but it was against the values upon which my father built the kibbutz." Shani (46, Kibbutz Mishmar) also mentioned her father: "I remember my father fighting unfalteringly (*beheruf nefesh*) against self-service, arguing that today it is a kettle, tomorrow a gas stove and by next week there would be no dining room."

Indeed, self-service stresses different social ideas and ideals than those governing serviced table meals, requires different abilities and fundamentally alters the diners' relationships (Wildt, 2001). First, while service to the table renders the diners passive and static, self-service requires the diners to actively pursue their food. It therefore demands self-initiative, motivation and dynamism. Second, self-service allows for a wider range of dishes than table service because it is more efficient, involves less food waste, requires less manpower and is technically more flexible in terms of dish variety (as it only requires additional trays). Self-service is therefore more attentive to personal preferences and enhances choice. Finally, self-service diners are not obliged to be considerate of others: those sharing a table do not eat from common bowls, as the food is served in large utensils which are constantly refilled.¹⁰

Yet the shift from table-filling to self-service was not only about efficiency and practicality, but also about ideology. Specifically, it was about the legitimization of individualistic wishes, tendencies and choices. The self-service system acknowledged that kibbutz members have personal tastes, social and gastronomical, and that such preferences are legitimate. This legitimization of individual preferences occurred right at the central, most public communal kibbutz institution—the dining room.

The second dining room crisis: Privatization

By the mid-1980s, the kibbutz movement was struck by a major crisis, whose sources were political, economic and social (Ben-Rafael, 1997; Lanir, 2004; Lapidot, Appelbaum and Yehudai, 2006). The Labor Party, the movement's main supporter, lost its political hegemony and had to share power with conservative right-wing parties. The change of political power balance exposed the deep resentment harbored by members of other social echelons, mainly working-class Mizrahim (Jews who originated from Muslim countries), against the kibbutz, its privileged status and discriminating policies (Bijaoui and Egozi, 1986). This was exacerbated by an unstable economy and poor economic decisions made in many kibbutzim, and it was fanned by Likud party electoral campaigns.

The wider context for these changes was the demise of socialism, the adoption of neoliberal ideology and policies at the national and personal levels, and the gradual shift from “melting pot” and “conscripted society” ideologies/policies to multiculturalism, individualism and capitalism. The kibbutz ideology and way of life lost much of their ideological appeal, and the ever increasing number of “kibbutz leavers” was no longer counterbalanced by young enthusiastic recruits. By the early 1990s, it was clear that a radical change was needed. Here again, it was all about “the end of kibbutz”: it was obvious that the kibbutz in its present form would not survive for long, yet a radical change would challenge the fundamentals and might alter the kibbutz to the point of extinction.

The main cure devised for the kibbutz crisis was *hafrata* or “privatization” (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2007; Helman, 1994; Rosner, 2000; Sosis and Ruffle, 2003), a process in which most of the common budgets (education, health and culture, as well as “personal maintenance”: food, clothing and millage) were divided between the members, who could now make their own economic decisions with their own money. The next stage was usually a move toward a differential salary.¹¹ By the end of 2010, there were 193 privatized or “renovating” kibbutzim out of a total of 264 (73%), 62 (24%) belonging to the “communal wing” of the kibbutz movement and 9 (3%) that devised a “combined model” (Getz, 2011).

It should come as no surprise that the dining room was identified once more as an important component of the crisis. In many kibbutzim, privatization of the dining room was deemed as the most urgent step in the attempt to overcome the crisis, and

the dining room was often the first kibbutz institution to be privatized. Quite a few interviewees pointed out that a communal fully functioning dining room is among the most salient features that distinguish communal from renovating kibbutzim.

While my research focused on a communal, a privatized and a privatizing kibbutz, the critique drawn by interviewees from the three kibbutzim regarding the dining room was quite similar. First and foremost, they depicted the dining room as wasteful. Danni, Kibbutz Dagan's former *econom* (dining room manager), told me how diners would fill their plates with huge amounts of food and would throw much of it into the garbage bins by the washing machine:

When we had to share our food with the other diners, members would see if someone took food in excess and would criticize him for that. They would often joke about it, but it wasn't really joking. Also, each table had a limited amount of food, so there was very little left over. But with self-service, people loaded their plates and then simply threw good food into the garbage. Dog owners would often put out a box with their dog's name on it, so that members would throw in their leftovers. You should see how much meat was left there.

Navon (2001) quotes a kibbutz movement functionary who reported that garbage decreased by 75% in privatized dining rooms.

Then there was the issue of food choice and quality. While in the early years, self-restraint and frugality were idealized, kibbutz members now wanted to enjoy the fruits of their economic success. They were also influenced by the increasing importance of consumption within Israeli society at large, and specifically by the attention paid to food, nutritionally and culturally (Gvion, 2005; Kleinberg, 2005). Yet the fordist kitchens of the large dining rooms that often fed thousands of people daily, and which were managed and operated by people whose culinary background and gastronomic tendencies and abilities were limited, produced food that was edible and apparently nutritious, but hardly tasty or pleasing.

While one of the fundamentals of the anthropology of food is that taste is culturally constructed (Bourdieu, 1984; Mennell, 1996) and that people develop a taste for what they have to eat—"a taste of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984; Gvion, 2006)—my interviewees bitterly complained about the food quality in the unprivatized dining room of the 1980s and 1990s. Their complaints were very much in line with the critique of dining rooms in other total institutions, such as military bases, academic centers, hospital cafeterias and factories. The food, I was told, was greasy, under- or over-seasoned, under- or over-cooked, industrialized, tasteless, characterless, monotonous and generally unappetizing. Nurit (54) from Kibbutz Hermesh recounted how

the new *econom* decided to add Chinese food to the menu. Every Tuesday we had stir-fried vegetables with chicken. But he had no idea how to cook

it. He used cheap soy sauce and overcooked the vegetables, and, as the dish was kept warm throughout the meal, it became soggy and disgusting.

Oded (45, Kibbutz Hermesh), who spent a few years in Singapore, said that he never understood “why rice was always under-cooked and tasteless...there are so many ways to cook tasty rice.”

Another problem had to do with the ease with which members could now take food out of the dining room. Termed the “plastic box phenomenon,” after the utensils used to take food home, it allowed members, who up until the introduction of self-service had to eat in the dining room, to take large amounts of food from the buffet and dine at home with their family members, further eroding the communal lifestyle. The following exchange, which took place in Kibbutz Tipa during dinner in 2009, exposes the tension around the fact that members take food from the communal dining room and eat it at home. Nehama approached Dan: “Is everything OK? You are taking food to the room again! Is Miriam [Dan’s wife] OK?” Dan explained that everything was fine and that “things were a bit busy with the kids” and so he was taking some food home. When he left, Nehama said: “This is the third time this week he’s taking food home, oblivious of everyone, thinking that this is a restaurant.”

While privatization meant that the plastic boxes were legitimized (but for a price), in Kibbutz Tipa, which has remained communal, this is still seen as a problematic practice and a breach of proper conduct:

The kibbutz is not what it used to be. Even though we have no privatization and we are communal, members would come into the kitchen and take boxloads of food and drinks home. We had to stop it. We locked the refrigerators. Otherwise the kibbutz would have gone bankrupt. Members were merciless and took food with no consideration of what is left for the others (Michael, 44, manager of Kibbutz Tipa’s catering system).

Yet, despite the critique of the communal dining room, the proposal to privatize it involved a debate that was much more intense than that preceding the shift to self-service. While some members considered this move urgent and even inevitable, others saw it once again as “the end of kibbutz.”

David (58, Kibbutz Mishmar), for example, perceived of it as a “no-choice” solution:

There was a time when no one came to the dining room anymore, only the elderly. Everyone thought that the kibbutz has lost it...privatization resuscitated the kibbutz and gave it a few extra years. The youth came from school, there was a feeling that there was choice and that anyone could find a place in the dining room. We have even reintroduced Sabbath meals.

Yet others members of the same kibbutz felt very differently. Becky said: "Once we had little choice of food, but the dining room was meaningful for the members. Today we have a lot of choice, but the dining room seems nonexistent for the members." Ruha added bitterly: "It is all over, there is no togetherness, everyone is on his own." Joe went so far as to say: "When it was decided to privatize the dining room, I felt as if one of my limbs had been amputated. That's it! What else is left?"

While Kibbutz Tipa's dining room remained fully communal, the dining rooms at Dagan and Mishmar both went through a process of privatization that included a gradual move toward full economic independence and commercialization. The dining room budget was divided between the members, and the food was priced. The price was subsidized for members, while "others" would pay the full price. The dining room was taken over by kibbutz members with previous experience who tried to run it as a profitable business. The food was diversified, and there was an attempt to improve the quality and taste. This, however, failed in both kibbutzim, as there was no change in kitchen personnel. As there was less and less demand, the decision was made to stop serving weekday dinners, meals on Saturday and, in Kibbutz Dagan, breakfasts too.

Here again, there were debates regarding the partial closure of the dining room. Avi (45, Kibbutz Mishmar) said:

I knew that this was the beginning of the end. Everyone said "it's only dinner," but I liked dinners the best. During breakfast and lunch I was anxious to return to work, but during dinner you meet friends, talk, enjoy.... Since we legitimized having dinners at home...there is no more "us"....

I personally attended the last breakfast served at Kibbutz Dagan. The feeling was very much that of a kibbutz veteran's funeral, with very few elderly members attending and a strong sense of "the end of an era."

Once it became clear that kibbutz members were unable to successfully operate the dining rooms of Dagan and Mishmar, they were subcontracted to non-resident professional caterers. In both cases, this resulted in improvement and diversification of the food, but also in price hikes, which stirred a lot of resentment, mainly because many members had no experience in personal budget management and had no idea how to deal with the unstable and volatile prices: "I'd rather eat a set menu at a restaurant than eat in the dining room, as prices rise every day. We joke that, as promised, there is a daily surprise in the dining room" (Zeev, 57, Kibbutz Mishmar).

However, Mishmar's dining room now features an ice-cream machine, an espresso machine and a sophisticated kitchen that produces a variety of dishes prepared by a professional chef that, according to some interviewees, are tasty and appealing. Leah explained: "The children wanted [sophisticated gourmet food] and times have changed. If this makes them come here, it's OK...we didn't lose anything, we only gained." Indeed, Mishmar's dining room is frequented by

outsiders, some on a regular basis.¹² Other interviewees, however, argued that the change was only about appearance, as the taste and quality remained inferior.

In Kibbutz Dagan, the non-resident chef

took it as a personal quest to save the dining room. So he decided to serve dinner once a week, but he serves very special things, like pizza and mousaka. Believe it or not, the dining room is packed. People missed dining room dinners. My daughter is crazy about it. She says that it is so convenient with the kids (Bat Sheva, 57).

While Dagan and Mishmar privatized their dining rooms, Tipa members staunchly resisted privatization and considered the dining room as the main proof of their ideological commitment: "The fact that we are still here, eating together, confirms that the dream is alive. The kibbutz is [still] above everything" (Nachum, 62). For Nachum, and for other members of both communal and privatized kibbutzim, a collective dining room is still the utmost authentication of the kibbutz and its unique way of life. Iris (41), who rents a house in Kibbutz Beit Yehuda, told me that in her kibbutz, "there is no dining room, they closed it down. And I know that this means that this is not a kibbutz anymore, and not even a community."

The (re)emergence of family, ethnicity and class in kibbutz dining rooms

Kibbutz scholars seem unanimous in arguing that the kibbutz crisis is very much a consequence of the shift from collective ideology to individualistic tendencies (Leviatan and Rosner, 2002; Maron, 2001; Ruffle and Sosis, 2006). Leviatan, Quarter and Oliver state:

The Israeli kibbutz is experiencing major changes.... The underlying debate is about what values should govern kibbutz functioning: Collective and altruistic values are clashing with individualistic and egocentric values in determining policies and directions for the future of the kibbutz society (1998:vii).

Fogiel-Bijaoui (2007:103) adds that, in the context of neoliberalism, the contemporary kibbutz emphasizes meritocracy, defined as a combination of individualism, capability, ambition, competition and hierarchy, all of which are individualistic qualities.

The term "individualism" is highly contested and the scholars quoted above do not offer a clear definition for it. Both scholars and kibbutz members seem to perceive of any group formation that does not include all kibbutz members as individualistic. This, however, contrasts Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2005:xxi)

definition of the “self-sufficient individual” as lacking any sense of mutual obligation toward other members of society. It also contrasts the vast sociological literature that stresses the tensions between the individual and the family, the village, the ethnic group or any other collective.

My findings suggest that collective ideology was not challenged merely by individualistic values or selfish inclinations, but rather by other collectives that compete for members’ loyalty and commitment: the family, ethnic groups and new socioeconomic classes that evolved within the process of kibbutz privatization. In what follows, I elaborate on each of these social entities.

The family

While Spiro (1963) and Talmon (1972) recognized well before the “kibbutz crisis” of the 1980s that the family was a main competitor for members’ allegiance, in the dining rooms I studied, it was clear that the battle was over, with the family, nuclear and extended, as the overwhelming frontrunner. In her seminal research on the family in the kibbutz, Talmon pointed out that the family, and specifically family meals, were recognized as threats to the communal ideology that had to be tackled:

[T]he tensions between the collective and the family...led to far reaching limitations of the family.... Among the many devices used to prevent the consolidation of the family as a distinct and independent unit...[was that] all meals were taken in a communal dining hall (1972:6).

The children had their meals in the “children houses,” members’ rooms had no cooking facilities (beyond the kettle), and family meals did not exist as such (Talmon, 1972:6).

With the institutionalization of the kibbutzim, the family gradually reemerged, along with the urge for family meals. Talmon (1972:82) detailed how even during the table-filling period, dinner (as opposed to lunch and breakfast) became a family matter within the dining room, a custom which was further facilitated once the dining room shifted to self-service (see also Tzur, 1987:52). Once *lina meshutefet* (communal children sleeping) was abolished and parents took over the feeding of their children, family dinners, whether in the dining room or at home, became the norm.

While in Kibbutz Dagan breakfast is not served in the dining room any more, Tipa members still have breakfast with their workmates. However, older retired members usually opt for their age set during breakfast and it was also hinted that they prefer the company of the comrades with whom they immigrated to Israel and arrived on the kibbutz. Thus, age and ethnicity, on which I elaborate in the next section, are important considerations during weekdays, breakfast and lunch.

In the privatized dining rooms of Dagan and Mishmar, there are no dinners except for Sabbath eve meals. In communal Tipa, dinner is on, with most diners eating with their nuclear family members, while many members prefer to eat at home. Ravit, an *ironit* (urbanite) who married a Tipa member, explained:

I don't eat my dinners here.... I don't have a kibbutznik's soul. The food wasn't tasty, so I wouldn't eat here at all. Now [after privatization] it's OK, so I do come here. But I don't take the kids out for dinner, I find it uncomfortable.

In the three kibbutzim, the Sabbath eve meal is a celebration of the family and the *hamula* (an Arab term often used in kibbutzim to denote an extended family). The dining rooms are full, and there may even be some queuing for tables at around 7 P.M. The diners sit at multigenerational, extended family tables. Many of the younger diners are children and grandchildren who left the kibbutz and come to have a Sabbath meal with their parents and grandparents. Very commonly, older kibbutz members approach the visiting siblings of other members to see their young children, who were born elsewhere.

Food is often taken in large utensils to be shared by family members. While the self-service system, along with the cashier, are designed to handle individual patrons, each with their own portions—priced according to unit and size—the large utensils and common plates often create friction and arguments regarding the price that should be paid. Quite a few members fill up large plastic boxes and take the food home, where they have their Sabbath meal in the company of their family members.

Altogether, it is clear that the dining rooms studied were transformed in line with demands of nuclear and extended kibbutz families, as the changes are meant to facilitate family meals, whether in the dining room or at home. And while kibbutz scholarship seems to perceive of familial tendencies as forms of individualism, the sociological convention that clearly distinguishes between the individual and the family should be acknowledged in this case, too: it is the family, and not the individual, which had the strongest impact on the restructuring of the kibbutz dining room.

Ethnicity

One of the main features of the kibbutz dining room is the fact that the food is structurally and materially Ashkenazi (typical of Jews who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe). The daily lunch and all festive meals consist of a sequence of starters, soup, main course of meat (or other proteins) accompanied by cooked vegetables and boiled/baked carbohydrates, dessert and hot beverages. This meal

composition clearly adheres to Douglas' (1972) and Murcott's (1982) model of British/Western meals. The same goes for cooking modes, choice of dishes and seasoning: schnitzel, boiled/broiled chicken and meat stews are common, along with boiled vegetables, baked/mashed potatoes, pasta and steamed rice. The seasoning is mild and the food is often bland. One of the main features of Kibbutz Dagan's lunches was the pale colors of the dishes, which had to do with the very mild gravies and seasoning.

Breakfast and dinner are similar, both featuring raw vegetables (for self-made salad), bread (which can be toasted), a few kinds of soft cheeses, boiled/fried eggs, butter and jam, and coffee/tea. Winter breakfasts sometimes include sweet oat/semolina porridge and there is an occasional "warm dish" for dinner, such as soup, pasta or quiche (often from leftover vegetables). While large amounts of raw vegetables and salads for breakfast and dinner are characteristic of modern Israeli eating, the other components are Ashkenazi in essence.¹³

The Ashkenazi character of the meal is clearer during Sabbath meals, which feature such Ashkenazi classics as chicken soup with egg noodles, beef stew and boiled radish, and is clearest during Jewish holidays, when *gefilte* fish (fish balls), chopped liver, matzo balls and even *regel krusha* (chicken-leg jelly) are served.

The kibbutz founders were mostly East European, and up until the early 1950s, most Jews in Palestine/Israel (and in the kibbutzim) were Ashkenazi. It is therefore hardly surprising that the food was East European, and for that matter, the fare of the poor: bread, hard boiled eggs, meat/fish balls "augmented" by onion and bread, herring, different kinds of porridges, boiled pearl barley, borscht, clear soups, *of-mechubas* ("laundered" or boiled chicken), boiled potatoes, jam and tea. The main local ingredients added to the menu were olives, halva, coffee, fruits (mainly bananas and oranges), raw vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers) and salads, and an increasing array of milk products made in kibbutz dairies.

However, Israel's ethnic composition has changed dramatically along the years, mainly during the 1950s, with a mass migration of Jews from Muslim Middle Eastern and North African countries (Mizrahim), and in the 1990s, when roughly a million immigrants arrived from the former Soviet Union. The ethnic composition of the kibbutzim was also affected by these demographic changes and is hardly as homogeneous as in the early 1950s.

Bijaoui and Egozi (1986) estimated some 20 years ago that roughly 9% of kibbutz members were Mizrahi.¹⁴ While figuring the exact number of Mizrahi kibbutz members is extremely difficult (Bijaoui and Egozi, 1986), it was clear to me while living in Kibbutz Dagan that the ratio of Mizrahi members was well beyond 10% and was approaching 30%–40% (inclusive of mixed couples and descendents of Mizrahi-Ashkenazi marriages), a fact that was confirmed by exploring Dagan's telephone list, which includes a significant number of Mizrahi surnames. Moreover, a substantial number of the contemporary dining room customers are "renters" and kibbutz employees, many of whom come from neighboring development towns,

where a large percentage of the population is Mizrahi. Other Mizrahi diners in Dagan were visitors who stayed at the kibbutz guesthouse.

This significant number of Mizrahi diners seems to have a minimal effect on the food composition and none on the meal structure. Both have remained essentially Ashkenazi. Thus, a kibbutz physician who immigrated to Israel from Russia told me that he found the dining room food “really, really homemade” and specifically commented on the soup that he perceived as a must, but was not always available in other Israeli food venues.

All three dining rooms studied served falafel balls and humus occasionally, but both are highly contested culinary artifacts in Israel, are mainly perceived as icons of Israeli national identity, and are detached from their Middle Eastern roots.¹⁵ The dining rooms also offered occasionally iconic Mizrahi dishes, such as couscous or *dag Mizrahi* (oriental fish—a frozen fish fillet cooked in red sauce, sometimes labeled “Moroccan fish,” originally termed *hraime*). However, these dishes were toned down in terms of spiciness, and though colorful, they hardly feature the strong tastes and aromas of the original dishes.

Yafa (46, Kibbutz Mishmar), a Mizrahi interviewee whose parents migrated from Morocco and who married a kibbutz-born Ashkenazi, said:

They cook Moroccan food here. They even asked me once to teach them how to cook it, but it turned out that my cooking was too spicy. So they replaced the hot paprika with sweet paprika. They have even replaced the beans in my *hamin* [Mizrahi *cholent*] with pearl barley. In short, Morocco in style....

David (63, Kibbutz Mishmar) added: “We have everything here: falafel, fish... truly, there is no ethnic discrimination. This kibbutz is the melting pot Ben Gurion was talking about.” When asked whether the food was spicy, he replied: “No... who would eat it? *We are still kibbutzniks*” (my emphasis).

This last remark exposes the gap between David’s description of a multiethnic, pluralistic cuisine based on egalitarian ideology and the realities of the melting pot ideology, which practically means that Mizrahi Jews are remolded into being Ashkenazi. It also means that Mizrahi food in kibbutz dining rooms is more about look than substance: the food looks right, but doesn’t taste right. This holds true for the dining rooms in other Israeli total institutions (open or not): meal structures and food seasoning are essentially Ashkenazi and/or Western. Thus, in the main institutions that are supposed to enact the “melting pot” ideology, the foodways expose a power structure where the hegemonic is presented as natural and rational (Tene, 2005).

This is all the more interesting when considering that most employees of the catering industry in Israel, and in the kibbutz dining room studied, are Mizrahi Jews, Palestinians and, more recently, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and migrant workers from Thailand and India. Though they cook the food, their own

culinary heritage is hardly represented in it, beyond the iconic toned-down dishes such as “oriental fish.”

Class

Privatization set the stage for the socioeconomic stratification of the kibbutz. While kibbutzim, like all other social organizations, have their own power structures, elites, modes of social remuneration and punishment, silent majorities and discriminated minorities the basic economic equality meant that, prior to privatization, social prestige and positions of leadership and decision making were the main positive reinforcements, while age and seniority (in terms of years of membership) defined members’ entitlement to socioeconomic benefits such as larger homes and paid holidays.

The introduction of differential salaries, based on members’ qualifications, expertise and skills, meant that, within a few years, some kibbutz members—mainly those holding managerial positions in the kibbutz industries—became relatively wealthy (Cohen, 2010), while others—mainly those who had fewer skills or whose jobs were privatized, sourced out or cancelled—became poor. Though most privatizing kibbutzim devised mechanisms that were supposed to prevent substantial social gaps, these procedures were easily overrun by the now increasingly powerful members of the managerial elite.

While most well-off members in Kibbutz Dagan were careful not to boast about their new wealth, which caused anger and critique in any case, the newly impoverished members were clearly observable in the dining room, as they took over food serving and dishwashing. As mentioned earlier, in the communal kibbutz, these tasks were rotated among all members in *toranuyot* (extra shifts). Managers of multi-million dollars factories would take their turn by the dishwashing machine or the dinner service just like everyone else, enacting the egalitarian principle.

Privatization meant that these shifts, just like the nightly guard shifts, were either canceled or redeemable for a fee. As manual, non-professional jobs, they were priced according to the minimum wage law, which was roughly 21 shekels (\$6.50) an hour during the research period. While the busy managers eagerly redeemed their shifts, the new kibbutz poor discovered that this was an opportunity to generate extra income after working hours. In fact, some of the more desperate members competed over these jobs, especially during weekends, when salary is increased by 50%. Thus, the new poor became very visible in the dining room—they were performing the menial unprofessional work.

Members’ economic distress also resulted in conflicts and quarrels regarding meal prices, and in techniques developed so as to reduce the expense of meals. Dafna, a Kibbutz Dagan member who lost her kibbutz factory job and was essentially moonlighting, told me:

My daughter was on a diet, but on that day there were French fries [a rare treat in kibbutz dining rooms] and she just wanted to have a bite. So she took a couple of pieces. The cashier charged her for a full carbohydrate portion. And as French fries were priced as a “special carbohydrate,” she charged her twice the price of a full carbohydrate portion, maybe one shekel (20 cents). I was furious... I yelled at her so that everyone heard...where was her common sense?

Samuel (64, Kibbutz Dagan) explained how meal prices are manipulated:

There are two bowl sizes. It was decided that a small bowl equals one portion and a large bowl equals two. But sometimes kids or guests don't know that, and place a spoonful of rice or salad in the large bowl. The cashier charges them for two portions even though they took less than one. But what can I do? It is embarrassing to tell your guests that they should only use small bowls....

He also explained how some members would stuff the small bowls and even press food into them: “If you take these bowls and turn them into the large bowls, you'll see how they manage to squeeze two portions in a single bowl and pay for one.”

Misunderstandings and overpricing of the food, however, were much more common when it came to the members of the new kibbutz social echelon: “the renters.” In recent years, many dwindling kibbutzim rent out available houses, as well as other structures and services (mainly education) to non-members. While some of the renters are members' children who want to live in the kibbutz, near their parents, but remain economically and socially independently, many others are attracted to the peaceful green setting, the high standard of education and the facilities. A significant number of renters arrive from neighboring development towns, and their relations with kibbutz members are particularly strained due to many years of animosity, jealousy and contempt. But no matter who they are, they are considered temporary outsiders even if they were born in the kibbutz and have lived there as adults for many years.

Discrimination against the renters is institutionalized in the double price system, which charges renters just like it charges an occasional patron stopping over for a single meal. While there are other modes of institutional discrimination against the renters, they are concealed (usually in the contract signed with the kibbutz). The double price system, however, is public and is enacted in the dining room—“the heart of hearts of the kibbutz” and the main hub of communality and egalitarianism. Commensality is clearly not meant for the renters.

Renters are further disadvantaged by the non-transparent food pricing and by the cashiers, who routinely overcharge them. In the three kibbutzim studied, there was no price list or any explanation regarding the pricing system. At one Shavuot¹⁶ meal I attended, one of renters told me:

When we finally reached the cheese buffet, there was hardly anything left. We had to contend with a few half-balls of cheese, torn cheese slices, miserable vegetables and squashed buns. But the cashier charged us the full price, and we paid much more than the price of a couple of cheese sandwiches in a cafeteria.

At a Sabbath meal, one of our closest friends, who was charged with dishing out the meat portions, carefully laid two slices of beef on top of one another and told me to “make sure that she charges you only for one slice.” At another meal he used the soup ladle to dig a bunch of chicken throats from the soup container, which he dished into my soup plate, saying “here we go.” When I discussed these events with another renter, she said: “Don’t you know? The price of the meal depends on your relations with the cashier.” This was confirmed by other renters, who recounted how their personal relations with dining room staff or cashier resulted in discounted and/or enlarged meals.

It turns out, then, that the recent stratification of privatized kibbutzim finds its most blatant expression in the dining room, the previous hub of commensality and egalitarianism, along with the family and the ethnic group. I now conclude by pointing to specific qualities of food and eating that explain the extreme ideological versatility of the dining room and its ability to adjust to changing circumstances.

Conclusion

Kibbutz ideologists, members and researchers have long argued that individualism is the main threat to the communal ideology and the main competitor over kibbutz members’ minds and hearts. In this article I have shown how individualizing processes resulted in unexpected twists, as traditional and primordial social entities, such as the family and the ethnic group, as well as new formations, such as the economic class, have emerged (or reemerged) in kibbutz dining rooms. Contemporary kibbutz members are hardly autonomous individuals lacking any sense of commitment to others. Rather, they are aligned with various social groups and subgroups within the kibbutz and beyond it.

The question remaining is what made the dining room, the main venue of kibbutz commensality and “togetherness,” so prone to competing social entities and ideologies, and why the sphere where the collective imposed its ideology most bluntly over its members manages to accommodate subversive and opposing ideas and ideologies. My final argument is that food and eating feature an internal contradiction that renders them both extremely important and extremely trivial and, as a consequence, so versatile and flexible.

Food, like the air we breathe, is essential for our survival. This makes it extremely important. However, the fact that we *need* to eat every few hours makes

eating the most routine and mundane human activity, second only to breathing. It is also a constant and, indeed, uncomfortable reminder of our biological nature. Eating is therefore trivial and non-reflexive: we think of food when we are hungry, and we hardly think of its cultural and social meanings, which are masked by biological motivations.

This was clearly the approach of the early kibbutz ideologists to food. Members had to be fed so as to accumulate the necessary energy for work, but the ideal of austerity condemned culinary pleasures as bourgeois practices that should be avoided. Yet, these very same ideologists devised the “table-filling” system that made the dining room the main hub of kibbutz communal and egalitarian ideology. The point is that the food itself did not matter (at least officially), what mattered is how and with whom you ate it. Similarly, the shift to self-service, and later on to privatization, were deemed by my interviewees as practical and social. The food itself was less important, though the quest for tasty food was mentioned, too.

While these eating modes were meaningful and expressed ideological inclinations and shifts, their importance was further camouflaged, so to speak, by food’s elastic and dynamic nature. As opposed to most other cultural artifacts, food is a matter in constant, fast-paced flux: “raw” is transformed into “cooked” and/or to “rotten” (Clark, 2004; Levi-Strauss, 1966) and the cooked is eaten (or discarded) within a few hours. Moreover, food is less prescribed and canonized than most other cultural elements and always features great variation. “Season according to taste”—the instruction that follows even the most meticulous recipe—canonizes this flexibility.

These qualities make food an extremely dynamic and polysemic symbolic means. They also render it symbolically allusive and unstable. Thus, for example, a private car parked by a kibbutz member’s home is a constant reminder of the economic inequality brought to the kibbutz by privatization. However, opting for expensive/cheap fare in large/small quantities is temporary; it can be interpreted in different ways and, therefore, ignored—after all, it’s only food.

NOTES

¹ Names of kibbutzim and of kibbutz members were all changed so as to protect the privacy of those who kindly shared their thoughts and knowledge with me.

² “Nahal” is an acronym for Noar Halutzy Lohem (Fighting Pioneering Youth), a military unit in which youth movement members serve with their peers in a *gar’in* (“core,” group). Each *gar’in* is matched with an “absorbing kibbutz,” in which the members spend roughly a year of their extended military service and to which they are expected to join as full members once their military service is over.

³ I have argued elsewhere (Avieli, 2005a) that, once the members of very large social groups, such as the modern nation, simultaneously eat the same food item

(e.g., “the national dish” on “the national day”), a sense of commensality and shared identity emerges that overcomes the murkiness characteristic of the imagined nature of modern communities (Anderson, 1983).

⁴ While those familiar with the kibbutz may find these observations trivial, they are indispensable for the uninitiated reader.

⁵ For instance, kibbutzim affiliated with the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair movement had a culinary legacy of purposely violating *kashrut* laws, mixing meat and milk or feasting publicly on rabbits and pigs.

⁶ For other social groups and contexts, see Appadurai (1988), Goodey (1982), Mennell (1996) and Narayan (1997).

⁷ It is tempting to suggest that the dining room is a Foucauldian/Benthamian panopticon. However, kibbutz members, and not some hidden big brother, are both watching and being watched from this towering structure, which is actually open to anyone. Moreover, much of the coercion takes place within the dining room itself, as members watch and criticize each other.

⁸ Eight is a “magic number” in most kibbutz dining rooms and was maintained after the shift to self-service, though the long tables were replaced by pairs of “tables for four” that “allow for more flexibility.”

⁹ The private tea kettle, which allowed members to have tea in their rooms, is one of the earliest “end of kibbutz” anecdotes (Spiro, 2004), mentioned time and again by my interviewees. It is interesting to note how a “cup of tea,” a most trivial and mundane culinary activity, is attributed social and ideological meaning. Just like in many Zen stories, it is precisely the taken-for-granted nature of the cup of tea which makes it such a powerful symbol. In kibbutz stories, however, it stands for the extent of the ideological commitment, which governed the most minute and, indeed, trivial activities.

¹⁰ When specific dishes are sought after more, because they are tastier or because their amount is limited (e.g., meat dishes or the fancier desserts), self-service diners are expected to be considerate of others and eat with restraint. However, as social control is weaker under such circumstances, it is often the case that an attendant is charged with distributing such dishes. When informal social control is weaker, a need for institutional control arises.

¹¹ Though mechanisms were established to prevent great income gaps, the outcome is the emergence of a narrow rich managerial class and an increasingly large echelon of mainly older kibbutz members who are poor and lack socioeconomic support.

¹² Every Thursday, a large number of Israeli Palestinians dine in Kibbutz Mishmar. According to the dining room manager, they are an important source of income. While we did not have a chance to interview them, their choice is extremely intriguing. My guess is that the appeal of the kibbutz dining room for them has to do with access to the holy of holies of the Israeli-Jewish elite, and with the sense of

modernity, sophistication and integration that they can suddenly purchase and consume.

¹³ This is in contrast to Mizrahi (Oriental) meals, which feature a large array of raw and cooked salads, vegetables cooked with meat, internal organs, stuffed vegetables and carbohydrate main dishes, such as rice or couscous. The food is abundant, spicy and colorful.

¹⁴ For a critical analysis of the term "Mizrahi," see Khazum (1999).

¹⁵ For a discussion of falafel, see Gvion (2006, 2009), Ram (2004) and Raviv (2003).

¹⁶ Pentecost, when dairy is customarily eaten.

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