

Trouble on the Kibbutz

"Is the Kibbutz Kaput?" by Tom Bethell, in *Reason* (Oct. 1990), 2716 Ocean Park Blvd., Ste. 1062, Santa Monica, Calif. 90405.

To Israelis, the kibbutz is as vital a national symbol as the family farm is to Americans. Like the American family farm, the kibbutz is an ideal that has been sustained by a few; at no time has more than three percent of Israel's population lived on a kibbutz. Now, according to Bethell, a *Reason* contributing editor, kibbutzim share one other similarity with family farms: They are facing extinction.

More than 80 years ago, kibbutzim were created to establish a Jewish presence in Palestine and to fulfill the socialist dreams of transplanted European Jews. Their communal ideology—members receive food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and a small stipend for their work but are allowed no personal possessions—amounts to almost a second religion. Organized as agricultural collectives, many of the 277 kibbutzim in Israel today also manufacture goods; at Kibbutz Tsuba outside of Jerusalem, for instance, laminated auto windshields are made. But despite their reputation as successful economic ventures, most kibbutzim have survived into the 1990s only through a combination of government subsidy, Jewish philanthropy, and debt forgiveness from Israeli banks. Their insolvency was exposed only during the 1980s by Israel's massive inflation. Today, the kibbutzim's debt is a staggering \$4 billion, equivalent to 13 percent of Israel's gross national product.

The problems were there from the start. Beginning after World War II, the Israeli government, sensitive to the symbolic importance of the kibbutzim, began subsidizing them and protecting them from competition. But this policy only made them

dependent on government aid. Even during the supposedly golden years of 1954–57, Bethell says, most kibbutzim lost money, once the depreciation of assets is accounted for. The Jewish Agency actually had to "adopt" 100 newer kibbutzim during the late 1950s and early '60s to save them from bankruptcy.

Unfortunately, money is not the only problem down on the kibbutz. Because of what one leader terms a decline in "ideological strength" among the young, older kibbutzniks are witnessing an exodus of their children. At least half, by some estimates two thirds, now choose to leave when they come of age. (Collective child-rearing—once applauded by psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim—was long ago eliminated at most kibbutzim.) Many youngsters are put off by the rigid property restrictions. According to Bethell, kibbutzim in recent years have "loosened their restrictions on private property," allowing members to own books, furnishings, and tools. But some leaders feel that too loose a standard will doom the kibbutzim.

What does the future hold? For now, the most pressing need is to pay off the debt. The government has organized a collective bailout, but the fear, says Bethell, is that "dead-weight kibbutzim will drag down those that are making a sincere effort." A more serious threat, however, may come from the young. Yochanan Blumenfeld, a second-generation kibbutz member, blames the financial troubles on a "crisis of motivation." Until kibbutzim solve the "problem of providing economic rewards," Blumenfeld predicts, "kibbutz members will vote with their feet."

Lethal Injection

"The Sick Man of Eurasia," in *The Economist* (Sept. 22, 1990), 10 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10020.

During the 1980s, Western analysts hotly debated the quality of health care in the Soviet Union—and, implicitly, the Soviet quality of life. While *glasnost* still has not come to Soviet health statistics, it is increasingly clear that the country has seri-

ous problems.

Infant mortality, the *Economist* notes, often used as a gauge of general health care standards, is very high. While fewer than 10 American infants in 1,000 die in their first year—high, by Western stand-