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In recent months, the precarious political situation which exists between the state of Israel and her Arab neighbours has entered a new phase of intensive diplomacy and political rhetoric. On an almost daily basis, local newspapers carry a story of some new development. Unfortunately, through all the politics, there has been little mention of the rich history of the land which is now Israel, and of the modern history of the Jewish state, both of which are vital to the sound judgement which is needed in this critical period. During this past summer, we had the opportunity to visit Israel. The chance to see first hand some of the triumphs and frustrations which have confronted this nation proved a great and rewarding experience.

Israel is a land of transition. It is rapidly expanding, in terms of both economics and population, to become a modern industrialized state. Yet its roots are in agriculture: many years of working the land has made possible the accomplishments visible today. Israel is the transition from a dream to reality. A 2000 year old idea in the minds of Jews around the world became fact when Israel declared her sovereignty in 1948. The dream that is strived for now is the possibility that Israel might be able to live in peace and prosperity.

The constant effort to create a homeland in an often inhospitable environment has bred a generation of aggressive and loyal people. These sabras, native-born Israelis, have been aptly described as tough and realistic. The word sabra is Arabic for the fruit of the cactus, "prickly on the outside but sweet within". It is the combination of these characteristics that has made their ties to their nation so strong. This feeling of dedication is very obvious in Israel and gives both the native and the stranger hope for the future.

To begin to understand the true character of Israel one must look beyond the fast-paced modern cities which are testimonials to Israel's thirty years of success. It is the kibbutz that reveals the hard work and dedication that lies behind these achievements. The kibbutz is the heartbeat of Israel.

When the first trickle of Jews, arrived in Palestine they were met with a most inhospitable land. To support themselves in their new home swamps had to be drained, irrigation systems installed, and erosion arrested. The kibbutzim were formed out of necessity not idealism as it was only in working together, shoulder to shoulder, that nature could be conquered. It was not only in the provision of food that the kibbutz was necessary but also for defense and the rapid absorption of illegal immigrants who were arriving by the thousands. This was a life of hardship. The people waged a constant war against floods, malaria, heat, hunger, isolation and ignorance of farming techniques. Their only option was a system of trial and error, having to fight and sacrifice for every ounce of life they squeezed out of the land. Perhaps more than anything the kibbutzim were an effort to throw off the fetters of the past and the stigma of being a ghetto Jew. They forged societies of equality where the women shared in all the work, responsibilities and opportunities with the men. Gradually the kibbutzim developed from working camps into homes as they took on the spirit of identity that had grown in the people. With time they became more comfortable, though never luxurious, as they acquired things of beauty: trees, flowers and finer buildings. Today the kibbutzim are living testimony to the world that untraditional ideas can be implemented and made successful.

There are in fact two types of communal life in Israel; the kibbutz and the moshav, the basic structure of the two being the same. In this style of life land, food, work and profits are shared equally among the members. The people eat together in a common dining hall but each married couple or single person has his own living quarters. The bringing up of children is the area where the kibbutz and the moshav differ. On the kibbutz the children live, from birth, in children's houses where their development is guided by peers and certain kibbutzniks designated to care for them. They spend two to three hours daily with their parents. This system relieves the women of the burden of child care so that they are free to work with the men in the fields. The children of the moshav, however, live with their families. From their early years children in both systems are taught to assume duties for the community. For a few hours each day the youngest care for the animals in their own miniature zoo, the older ones look after their younger companions and work beside their parents in the fields. This method of raising children teaches them to interact easily with their peers and to be willing to devote time and effort to the betterment of their society.

The kibbutz is more than a simple farm, it is a farming community. With anywhere from fifty to one thousand members the kibbutz needs a variety of activities to support itself throughout the year. These may include the raising of cattle and poultry, and the farming of cotton, potatoes, avocados, and a variety of fruit (pears, apples, banbas, oranges and grapefruit). Factories are also maintained by some kibbutzim. All production, however, is dependant upon an elaborate irrigation system whose maintenance demands a fair number of the workers.

Less than 5 percent of Israel's people live on kibbutzim, however, kibbutzniks exert an influence far beyond their numbers. The kibbutzim are the backbone of the economy; providing food for internal consumption and export. The independant farmer is virtually unknown in Israel, the odds against his success are just too great. Politically as well as economically, kibbutzniks are exceptionally active. An extremely high number of leaders both in the army and in the government, have their origins in the kibbutz. These men are the fruits of the training in responsibility and understanding for other men.

The existence of the kibbutz in Israel offers a unique opportunity to young people of other countries. The populations of the kibbutzim are gradually decreasing as members of the second generation of kibbutzniks, now adults, are moving on to begin new lives in the cities (urbanization is an escalating trend in Israel also). Thus the kibbutzim are losing their manpower at the same time as they are trying to overcome their dependance on hired Arab labour. Volunteers from foreign lands are a welcome and common component of most kibbutzim. Being such a volunteer is an exciting way of experiencing the lifestyle of another culture and receiving the pleasure that comes with working the land with one's own hands.

Next to the kibbutz, perhaps the most important factor influencing the character of Israeli society is the omnipresence of the army. This presence is the only sign that Israel sits on a potential power-keg — Israelis seem unconcerned that they are living in constant danger. Life must go on and worry cannot be an element of everyday life. Soldiers are everywhere in the towns and on country roads, in stores and on buses. The military plays a very large role in the life of every citizen. Upon graduation from highschool boys are enlisted for three years and girls for two.



A Volunteer Worker In Cotton Fields of Kibbutz Bar Am, Northern Galilee



The Western V



Miniature Zoo at Kibbutz Bar Am, Northern Galilee