The Kibbutz Today

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Parashat Vayishlach 5767]

Question. Is the kibbutz ideal appropriate for today or for the future, or perhaps not at all?

Answer. The Torah does not say “kibbutz” and it does not say “not kibbutz.” What it says is:

Do kind deeds for people, love them and help them. Everyone must calculate the best way for him to perform lots of kind deeds.

Maran (our revered teacher) Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook was asked by “Ha-Poel Ha-Mizrachi” – the Religious Zionist Labor Organization – what regime the Torah wants for the Jewish State. After all, “Ha-Poel Ha-Mizrachi” had socialistic leanings. What characterizes a capitalistic regime is its freedom and liberalism. Everyone does whatever he likes, and economic life achieves a balance amidst the struggle of market forces. In a socialistic regime, the government intervenes. It has control over the means of production and over the size of salaries.

Rav Kook responded. Without getting into the question of what the Torah wants, it is clear that a regime of private property is undesirable if we are to fulfill everything written in the Torah (Igrot Gedolei Yisrael, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Shragai).

Indeed, if someone helps the poor in accordance with his duty, nothing will be left for his
own needs. We have an important principal that one’s own life takes precedence over the
life of his fellow man (Baba Metzia 62), yet one's luxuries do not take precedence over the
life of one's fellow man. The same ruling appears in the letters at the end of the Sefer Ha-
Tanya, and as well as in Aruch Ha-Shulchan (Yoreh Deah 251), the Chafetz Chaim’s Ahavat
Chessed and Maran Ha-Rav Kook’s Responsa Orach Mishpat.

The source is in the Talmud (Nedarim 80), which states that it cannot be that one person
can be doing his wash if another lacks drinking water. It is true that there is an opinion that
one is allowed under such circumstances to do one’s wash, because dirty clothing can breed
sickness. Let us therefore say simply, it cannot be that you will water your garden and your
fellowman will have no water to drink. It cannot be that you will eat ice cream and your
fellowman will have no food. It cannot be that you will have a video and your fellow Jew
does not have a bed, etc...

According to Halachah, you must give your fellow everything he needs, in accordance with
your ability. You are not obligated to make him wealthy, but you must provide him with his
essential needs. How does one gauge “essential needs”? That is a complicated business, but
it is clear that you cannot live in luxury while your fellow lacks the minimum.

At the end of his work “Ahavat Chessed,” Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan – the “Chafetz Chaim” –
explains that at one time people were poor, but now times have come when we are
relatively rich. Obviously, he is not talking about countries like China, in which a laborer
earns twenty-five cents a day, and if he is a skilled laborer, a dollar a day, and they are
content that they have got something to eat. Nor is he talking about India, where a worker
earns twelve cents a day.

Yet the State of Israel is a wealthy country, amongst the twenty wealthiest countries on
earth. Our lives are full of luxury, from telephones to tape recorders to nice furniture. The
Chafetz Chaim says this about his own times, and it applies all the more regarding our
times, thus reinforcing our duty to supply the poor with their needs, in accordance with our
ability.

It is true that our Sages set a fixed rate of “ma'aser”, how much we must give to the poor,
namely a tenth. The Torah did not stipulate such an obligation. It only says that we must
give in accordance with the poor man's needs and our own ability. It was our Sages who
assessed that our ability is ten percent. Yet the Chafetz Chaim in Ahavat Chessed explains
that this is referring to medium-income people. The poor should give less. They cannot give ten percent when they are in bad overdraft already at the start of the month. Likewise, the rich man can give much more than a tenth of his profits. For example, if someone earns a million dollars a month, and in this country there are many like that, even if he gives 99% of his profits, he will still be left with ten thousand dollars to live on, and he will be able to live in luxury.

The time has come to give. To give!