

### Welcoming the Sabbath on the Kibbutzim: Secular Religiosity

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### Abstract and Keywords

The Kibbutz culture was one of resistance; its very essence was resistance to classical European Judaism and a commitment to create the *new Jew* in his historic homeland. The kibbutz members left behind them the religious and liturgical culture of the past and experimented in creating a comprehensive and all-inclusive society, encompassing all aspects of the economic, social, and cultural life of its members. Albeit secular and even atheist, some of the more creative expressions of Israeli spirituality resided within the gates of the kibbutzim. To this day, some of the most interesting Israeli ritual innovations have deep roots in kibbutz culture. This essay examines the communal Shabbat welcoming ceremonies celebrated before Friday night dinner in the Kibbutz dining room. It explores the discussions and often intense arguments that accompanied their creation, the content of these ceremonies. It addresses the controversies relating to the Shabbat candle lighting and the special secular liturgies that were composed in the kibbutzim for this practice. The essay also discusses the emergence of the Shabbat welcoming ceremony in its historic context and its gradual disappearance (or its change) due to the waning of Kibbutz ideology.

Keywords: Kibbutz, Judaism modern, secularity, socialism, Israel State of, Sabbath, education, privatization, Zionism, community

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Psalms on the big lawn

On Friday evening in summer: The dining hall

Sails on the big lawn like a ship,

Its windows illuminated. The children

Play on the lawn. The parents in white shirts

Relax and chat on the plaza.

Evening spreads its wings like a hen

Gathering her chicks

Under her wing.

For me, this is the finest hour in the world. In the entire universe [...]

(How little we know about this elusive thing

That descends on us suddenly

As if

The skies were suddenly opening up with some kind of promise [...])

(Alon 1991, 10)

The kibbutz is the heir of the Jewish community [...] The need of the kibbutz to be transformed from a Utopia to a place is like the Jewish need to develop *Halakhah* [religious law]. (Tzur 1987, 212-213)

Judaism is unique in that it is not only a religion, but also a culture, a nationality, and an ethnic group.<sup>1</sup> Over the generations Jews have seen themselves as adherents of the Jewish religion, but also as members of the Jewish people, with all this entails. The processes of secularization in the Jewish communities in the Western world began in the late eighteenth century. The emancipation and weakening of the establishment Jewish community, since the end of the 18th century onward, allowed many Jews to embrace certain dimensions of their Jewish identity while abandoning others (Ellenson 2014). A situation thus emerged in (p. 506) which large groups within the Jewish people considered themselves committed to Jewish culture, peoplehood, and nationality but did not see themselves as committed to (and in some cases actively opposed) Jewish practice and doctrine.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the dynamics between religion, nationality, and peoplehood led to some fascinating experiments. One of the most sustainable projects that emerged from this dynamic situation was the kibbutz. The Zionist pioneers were committed to the Jewish people and to Jewish nationality and sought to renew the organic Jewish connection to the Land of Israel. At the same time, they consciously rejected traditional Jewish mores and practices.

The kibbutz, as a voluntary, communal, and socioeconomic cooperative form of life, is unique to Israel. The foundations of this enterprise were laid in the early twentieth century (Leichman and Paz 1994; Near 1992-1997). The first kibbutz was established in 1909, while kibbutz movements reflecting different political and organizational orientations took shape during the 1920s and 1930s. Today there are some 270 kibbutzim in Israel. In economic terms, the kibbutzim originally depended mainly on agriculture, but over the years they also developed industrial, commercial, and tourism enterprises.<sup>2</sup>

This article will focus on one specific example of the way the kibbutzim addressed questions of Jewish faith, heritage, and lifestyle: the manner in which they shaped ceremonies on Friday evening for welcoming the Sabbath (on the traditional *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremony, see Green 2004; Hoffman, 1997; Kimelman 2003). Discussion of issues relating to the shaping of civil religion in Israel in general, and the character of the Sabbath in particular, are not unique to the kibbutzim. From the earliest stages of Zionism and through to the present day, these issues have been the subject of vigorous public debate in Israel (Yarden 1998). However, since the kibbutzim strove to create their social and cultural life as autonomous units within a cooperative economic framework, the question of the way they shaped the Sabbath was raised in a particularly explicit and focused manner. The *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremonies as observed in the kibbutzim constitute a case study of a well-defined society that engages in reflection on its spiritual, communal and cultural character within the Jewish context.

The shaping of *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremonies in the kibbutzim has not yet been studied in a focused manner. Accordingly, this study draws mainly on the testimonies of cultural leaders from the kibbutzim, archival materials (particularly materials from the Festivals Archive on Kibbutz Beit Hashita, founded by Aryeh Ben-Gurion), minutes of kibbutz meetings, personal correspondence, kibbutz newsletters, position statements, handouts distributed at *Kabbalat Shabbat* ceremonies, and personal interviews. I also obtained access to many booklets and volumes produced by cultural leaders with the goal of encouraging the dissemination and accessibility of materials to kibbutz society as a whole—endeavors that in themselves testify to the importance that these individuals attached to their labors.

I will begin with a brief description of the situation on the kibbutzim during their early decades in terms of attitudes regarding religion in general and to welcoming the Sabbath in particular. The article will focus mainly on the classic period of the kibbutzim (i.e., following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948) and, in particular, the period from the late 1960s through the beginning of the present century. This essay offers a cultural and contextual critique of a phenomenon that forms part of a dialectical discourse on secular religiosity. This perspective is by its nature multifaceted and multidisciplinary, and accordingly the essay includes elements of textual study and interpretation, esthetic literary criticism, social and cultural context, and the discipline of ritual studies.

### (p. 507) **A. The Kibbutz and Judaism**

The Zionist pioneering movement (with the kibbutz as its crowning glory) was founded on the desire to create a “New Jew”—Hebrews living on their own land in their historical homeland and pursuing productive, meaningful, and cooperative lives. This worldview emerged largely as a counter-culture opposed to the longstanding model of Diaspora Judaism. The way of life on the kibbutzim was secular, sometimes provocatively so. The founding generation sought to detach itself from the religious traditions of Diaspora Judaism and to return to primal, pre-Diaspora sources and to establish vibrant communities

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based on working the land, economic and social cooperation, and new cultural creativity. Nostalgia for the traditional familial home was sometimes almost unbearable but nonetheless perceived as illegitimate. Instead, these longings were channeled into new celebrations, sometimes relating to the traditional ones with an almost sardonic character. Such celebrations sought to confront the discomfort and sorrow caused by the disconnection from the Jewish home that the pioneers left behind. The poet David Shimonovich (1891–1956) expressed this sense of voluntary uprooting in a well-known poem that opens with the following lines:

Do not listen, son, to the morality of your fathers  
and to the teachings of your mother pay no heed,  
For the fathers' morality is "line by line"  
And the mothers' teachings are "slowly, slowly..."  
A spring storm speaks thus:  
"Listen, man, to the song of the son!" (Shimonovich 1920)

This poem, which turns the words of the Bible (Prov 1:8) upside down, was included in many of the early Passover Haggadot from the kibbutzim, emphasizing the inversion of the traditional commandment to "tell your son." However, it was removed in the aftermath of the Holocaust when the "father's" culture ceased to be a threat and instead came to embody nostalgic longings for an era that could never return. It is reasonable to assume that recognition of the annihilation of European Jewry (which previously existed alongside the Zionist enterprise) was one of the factors that led to a greater commitment to address Jewish themes.

Although the kibbutzim avoided any form of institutionalized or organized religion, they appear to have maintained a degree of openness to religiosity. David Canaani, who studied Judaism in the early kibbutzim, described this religiosity as "a somewhat vague box, identified with creativity, poetry, art, and even science; with longings and rumination about the riddle of the world, the riddle of humanity, and the meaning of human existence" (Canaani 1976, 49). Zvi Zohar described the religious person in the pioneering setting as someone "who sets before himself service to humanity—service to the ideal of advancing and perfecting humanity—a person who searches for a bond with nature and the world, with human history, and with his own culture" (Zohar 1931, 155). To these definitions, we should probably add an attraction to the ethereal, even if this is not referred to by the name "God." The pioneers maintained a complex relationship with Jewish heritage based on selective adoption. Traditional concepts such as "holiness" were transformed into "secular holiness" focusing on the values of labor, nationality, and socialism. The religious yearning (p. 508) for "redemption" became "the redemption of the soil," and so forth. Public song sessions on the kibbutzim acquired a quasi-liturgical character, and even the name "kibbutz" appears to have been inspired by the Hasidic world. Yet despite this, the young kibbutz movement does not appear to have engaged in any explicit or systematic attempt to address questions of Jewish faith and identity in the context of the national revival in the Land of Israel.<sup>3</sup>

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It seems justified to refer to the kibbutz as a faith-based community even if the focus of this faith is not God but the human being, community, land, and language (Lilker 1973, 233). The all-encompassing nature of the observant Jewish lifestyle embracing, as it does, all facets of life is similar to that of the kibbutz lifestyle. This similarity is manifested not only as a social observation but also as an ideological statement. Muki Tzur, one of the prominent thinkers of the kibbutz movement, declared that “the kibbutz is the heir to the Jewish community” (Tzur 1987, 212–213), and accordingly should develop a *Halakhah* (a structure of laws and rules) adapted to its values and practices.

Aryeh Ben-Gurion (1916–1998), one of the prominent thinkers of the kibbutz movement and a member of Kibbutz Beit Hashita, refers to the thinkers and leaders of this movement as “the people of the Community-Rule Scroll” (Ben-Gurion 1984, 357). This term is drawn from the history of the Dead Sea scrolls that describe a sect whose members left what they perceived as the corrupt city of Jerusalem during the late Second Temple era and formed what was believed to be a model just and egalitarian society. By adopting this term, Tzur links the kibbutzniks directly to the ancient chain of Jewish culture, and particularly to the revolutionary component of this culture. From this perspective innovation and creativity are the essence of Jewish heritage, and the kibbutzim are merely one link in this chain.

Nevertheless, the members of the kibbutzim recognized that they were engaging in a dramatic form of innovation that could not be viewed as the direct or organic continuation of the course of Halakhic development. Indeed, the very idea of renewing Jewish national life in Israel was associated from its inception with a tendency to return to ancient Israelite days and to abandon the culture, tradition, and practices of Diaspora life. Yet even this *sui generis* creativity required symbols capable of igniting the imagination—and specifically symbols drawn from the Jewish heritage.

Aryeh Ben-Gurion was the motivating force behind the demand to address the Jewish sources seriously in the United Kibbutz movement. The poet and composer Matitياهو Shelem played a similar role in the Union of Kvutzot and Kibbutzim, while the poet Abba Kovner did so in the Kibbutz Artzi Movement (the most left-wing and secular of the kibbutz movements). In 1982, at the opening session of the Council of the Kibbutz Artzi Movement under the heading “Judaism and Our Life Culture,” Kovner declared:

Education isn't everything. Culture cannot exist solely on an intellectual level [...] Every human culture needs a system of symbols, ceremonies, and customs that translate abstract principles into a basic human experience.

(cited in Ben-Gurion & Shua 1984, 369)

Kovner urged his movement to “return in thought”—in other words, to draw from the Jewish heritage without accepting halakhic authority (Ofaz 2016, 54–55). Commitment to the Jewish heritage “on the basis of a perception of its capacity for renewal” (Tzur 1987, 212–216) has always been a position accepted by a few individuals, but this phrase seems to offer an apt explanation for the profound meaning of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies on

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the kibbutzim. The kibbutzniks had no interest in “returning to the faith” in the Orthodox (p. 509) and halakhic sense of the term. Nevertheless, some of them, at least, gradually came to recognize that in order to encourage growth, roots must be deepened.

The founding generation of the kibbutzim was perceived as heroic and revolutionary—rebels who cast away their past and came to the Land of Israel to build a model society. By contrast, the second generation was seen as rather uninspiring (Bettelheim 1969). Adopting terms coined by Shulamit Hareven, who discussed the changing generations in the kibbutzim, the founders were referred to as the generation of “Abraham,” after the ancient father of the Hebrew people who is himself regarded as a rebel and a founder, while their children were termed “the generation of Isaac”—an obedient and uncreative second generation capable merely of preserving what was established by their revolutionary parents (Avishag, 1970). The “Isaacs” were unwilling or unable to rebel against the dominant “Abrahams” as the latter had rebelled against their own parents. Against this background a small group of kibbutzniks from the third generation sometimes referred to as the “Jacobs,” the third ancestor of the Jewish faith (Livni 1990), attracted attention after they founded the journal *Shdemot* (literally, cultivated land) in 1960. Headed by Avraham (Pachi) Shapira as the editor, *Shdemot* and the circle that developed around the journal provided young kibbutzniks with a platform for the clarification of ideals and ideologies including questions of Jewish and Israeli identity (Ofaz 2016). Perhaps surprisingly, Israel’s sweeping victory in the Six Day War of 1967 led kibbutzniks to raise questions about their underlying values and identity. The wave of youth rebellion in Europe during the same period also influenced their refusal to accept values and norms without question (Ofaz 2016, 104).

The members of the “*Shdemot* Circle” assumed the role of being the voice for an entire generation. It remains unclear how many people actually read the journal and shared the group’s soul-searching and its desire to return “to the wisdom of Judaism” (in the sense of the accumulated wisdom of the Jewish people over the centuries). The combined impact of the lessening of the pioneering and ideological tension embodied by the founders of the kibbutz made possible the emergence of a new generation of kibbutzniks and a widespread openness to study. This form of study combined a critical approach with an emotional and even spiritual dimension, which prepared the ground, at least indirectly, for the emergence of Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in many kibbutzim.

## B. Sabbath on the Kibbutz

Despite their distaste for the religious aspects of the Sabbath (and the laws regarding its observance), the kibbutzniks recognized the important social value of a day of rest for workers.<sup>4</sup> This was one of the intersections at which Judaism met the cooperative and social values of the kibbutz world. In addition to this general message, marking the Sabbath on the kibbutzim was perceived by the members as a manifestation of commitment and partnership with the Jewish people as a whole. Even if they observed the day differently from the traditional Jewish approach, the very act of marking it showed that they were

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partners in the collective Jewish fate and destiny. The kibbutzniks also viewed the Sabbath as an important cultural and communal asset. It provided time to rest from their busy routine and to enhance and cultivate personal, family, and communal bonds.

(p. 510) However, this recognition was not immediately translated into action. Writing in 1918, Aharon David Gordon commented that “our mundane day is much finer than that of our brothers in the Exile but Sabbath and the festivals are much finer in the Exile” (Gordon 1957, 287). The creative efforts of the kibbutzniks focused mainly on developing a valid and meaningful routine for the days of work, whereas the Sabbath sparked associations of discomfort, boredom, and degeneration. Eliezer Shokhat, A member of Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim wrote of the Sabbath: “It brings a reduction [...] that reminds me of a small town [in the Diaspora]—boredom and degeneration” (Canaani 1976, 95). The pioneers created their routine of agricultural labor largely *ex nihilo*, and in doing so rejected the familiar Sabbath experiences of their lives before joining the kibbutz. Yet the Sabbath itself, set apart from their busy daily routine, gave the kibbutzniks time to remember and reflect on the Sabbath they had experienced in their parents’ homes. It may be unnecessary to note that such longings were considered illegitimate and were a source of great frustration for the pioneers.

Over the subsequent decades kibbutzniks generally tried to avoid explicitly religious language, although it is clear that they structured the kibbutz Sabbath in a manner that deliberately sought to distinguish it from the other days of the week. Indeed, the unique character of the Sabbath was made clear in its contrast to the other days of the week. The efforts to shape the character of the kibbutz Sabbath focused mainly on Friday evening. Relatively little attention was paid to shaping the cultural character of Saturday. Nevertheless, the Sabbath as a whole clearly acquired a distinct cultural character. On Friday the work day ended earlier than usual. This was also the day on which the members received their clean clothes from the laundry, including the white shirts that marked their festive dress. A special communal dinner was held in the dining hall to mark the Sabbath, often accompanied by some form of program. These Kabbalat Shabbat programs are the focus of our attention here. In many kibbutzim a cultural program was held in the community room (*mo’adon*) after the evening meal. The Sabbath ended with a kibbutz meeting that was traditionally held on Saturday evening, and included discussion of routine matters as well as questions of principles relating to the life of the kibbutz.<sup>5</sup>

The shaping of the Sabbath constituted a second wave in the process of formulating Jewish ceremonies on the kibbutzim. Festivals of national and agricultural importance, such as Passover and the Festival of the First Fruits, were the first traditional rites to be reshaped in the pioneering spirit. These festivals have also been the subject of considerable research interest (Zeira 2002, 167–184, 201–292). The character of the kibbutz Sabbath was based on these precedents. We will divide our discussion of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies into three periods: the first decades of the kibbutz; the 1960s and 1970s, as the main period of development and consolidation; and recent developments on the kib-

butzim. Our main focus will be the second of these three periods, especially the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies held in the kibbutz dining hall.

### C. The Kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat

An examination of the patterns of development of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies on the kibbutzim necessitates the study of each instance individually. This study encompasses the processes of its creation, the forces that shaped the ceremony, its history and the extent to which it was accepted. All of this took place independently in each kibbutz, in large (p. 511) measure as a product of the actions of a small number of passionate advocates who encouraged and led the programs. In addition, this study takes considers periods of success and decline, and—in many cases—the discontinuation of the ceremony following the privatization processes experienced by kibbutzim and the resulting elimination of the common dining hall. It is difficult to draw generalized conclusions regarding the character of the kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat (or even regarding the scope of this phenomenon) due to the limited availability of material and the high level of variance among the kibbutzim (and indeed within each individual kibbutz during different periods). Nevertheless, despite the unique circumstances of each kibbutz, we can identify certain commonalities in terms of the development of Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in the kibbutz movement. There were some initiatives to collect the experience of cultural leaders of the kibbutzim, and their reflections on the issue highlighted the emotions of cultural officials and rank-and-file members on the kibbutzim. The following sections present an outline of these commonalities.

#### C1. The Early Years: Spontaneity and Longing

From the inception of the kibbutz, special events were held on Friday nights in some of the kibbutzim. On Kibbutz Kinneret, all the members would gather on Friday evening for singing and dancing that was “semi-spontaneous, referred to in their memoirs as *niggun* [the term used for Hasidic singing], led by a cantor with the response of the public” (Zeira 2002, 203–206, 300). As one member described, the members would arrive “in white shirts, shaved and their hair combed [...] there was [...] profound longing in this for family life and much sadness” (Zeira 2002, 205). These events did not have a permanent character, nor were they found everywhere. They constituted a spontaneous response to the members’ needs. A typical description of communal singing on Friday night on Kibbutz Geva notes the underlying paradox of the behavior of the early kibbutzim: “They were anti-religious, indeed fervently anti-religious, and they worked on the Sabbath [which is halakhically forbidden], yet they sang the Hasidic songs, “Purify Our Hearts” and “You Are One and Your Name Is One” (Ben-Gurion & Shua 1984, 242).

#### C2. Kabbalat Shabbat: From the Education System to the Dining Hall

An important factor that helped to mediate between the early spontaneous events of Sabbath evening and the more formalized events in the dining hall was the kibbutz education



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system. While most kibbutzim faced difficulties and challenges in shaping a meaningful Sabbath experience, they enjoyed significant successes in the educational realm. One should note that kibbutz children lived together in “children’s homes” that functioned as mini-kibbutzim. This was the arrangement through adolescence. Numerous descriptions testify to the efforts made to shape a unique and celebratory Sabbath experience in the education system. These descriptions emphasize cleanliness of both the body and the home, special foods presented on tables covered with white cloths, and the stylized reading of stories and poetry. The character of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in the children’s homes was adapted according to the children’s age, but reflected definite ideological themes promoting the lifestyle and values of the kibbutz. Many educators commented on the (p. 512) children’s willingness to accept the Shabbat experience as something natural, authentic, and obvious; they were free of the critical reactions that characterized their parents (“they didn’t know that it was prohibited to believe in God,” a veteran kibbutz member commented to me during a discussion of this subject).

The success in the educational realm only served to accentuate the difficulties in shaping the overall communal character of the Sabbath. During the early years of the kibbutz, a member of Kibbutz Ein Harod complained about the disconnect between what was taught in the children’s homes and what occurred in the family home: “In kindergarten the child sees lighted candles and they welcome the ‘Sabbath Queen’, but when he goes home he sometimes finds a disorderly shack” (Zeira 2002, 208). Educational needs dictated the creation of a meaningful Sabbath experience for adults, too (Lilker 1973, 202). Parents occasionally attended the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in the children’s homes and in other educational contexts and gradually became accustomed to these activities. This laid the groundwork for the subsequent introduction of Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies for the entire kibbutz in the dining hall (Ben-Gurion & Shua 1984, 246–247). It is important to recall that the kibbutz was perceived as an alternative extended family, and the dining hall (which was sometimes referred to as “the home”) served as its core. Accordingly, it was only natural that the activity of welcoming the Sabbath, which had traditionally taken place in the home, should be held in the kibbutz dining hall.

The fact that the collective Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in the kibbutz dining halls had their origins in the children’s homes and in the educational system highlights the important role women played in introducing the ceremony and shaping its ceremonial and thematic dimensions. Gad Ofaz, who describes the tension between the founding generation of “Abrahams” and the lackluster second generation of “Isaacs” who lived under their shadow, comments:

The father as priest and as ideological prophet is embodied in the absence or the silence [or: silenced] description of the mother [...] It is the father who stands for the idea, the faith, the ideal, and ideology. In the confrontation between the father and the son and heir, there is neither room nor need for mothers who represent earthy reality, softness, innocence, and love.

(Ofaz 2016, 73–74)

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The emergence of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony might be seen as a process that reinstated the importance of family in general, and mothers in particular—both due to their function as those who lit the candles and because they served as key figures in the kibbutz educational system. As the mythological and awe-inspiring founding “Abrahams” of the early kibbutzim gave way to the next generation, a different type of leadership was able to come to the fore. In the context of the kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat, the new leader often took the form of the “mother” who had been so badly missed by the early kibbutzniks. This is an aspect we will discuss further in the next section.

### C3. The Consolidation of the Kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat

As noted, the first attempts to hold Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies were made during the early years of the kibbutz. The broader acceptance of this phenomenon, however, came (p. 513) later, particularly in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Shelem 1976, 3–4). This coincided with more general processes of change among young members of the kibbutz movement following the Six Day War of 1967 and the Yom Kippur War of 1973 (to be discussed further).

In a collection published in the early 1970s, editor Matitياهو Shelem (1905–1974) from Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan presented a number of suggestions for Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies marking various special events on the calendar. Shelem remarked that such ceremonies had become commonplace on many kibbutzim, although no clear formula had as yet emerged for their structure. These initial attempts were promising. Shelem added: “We would like to ensure a genuine cultural experience on a day that is mainly devoted to social enjoyment, deepening awareness of values, and studying the diverse sources of our culture, and we have already set out on this course. The Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony is an indispensable aspect of all these actions.” The booklet also quotes comments by the author David Meletz (1899–1981) from Kibbutz Ein Harod Ikhud, who noted that the Sabbath constitutes “the manifestation of absolute stability and absolute sanctity,” adding that “even the most rebellious and heretical have recognized this fact” (Shelem, 1970, 4).

For the purposes of our discussion the content of these Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies is of crucial concern. Did these ceremonies embody the adoption of ready-made themes from the tradition, or did they exemplify new creativity intentionally based on tradition? The answer to this question is nuanced. In some cases the ceremonies had a decidedly folkloristic and nostalgic tone, typified by the use of Hasidic (or pseudo-Hasidic) songs and traditional tunes that had no particular connection to the kibbutz way of life. This served to emphasize the distinction between the Sabbath and the other days of the week. Other ceremonies show a clear tendency to create original versions of the traditional Sabbath symbols and ceremonies, imbuing them with a communal, collective, and secular character. This later process included the introduction of special new blessings for the lighting of the Sabbath (see section C.6).

Some Kibbutz members emphasized the need to hold Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies that did not “contradict the mood and thought process of modern people and our Jewish world

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view.”<sup>6</sup> A comment in the newsletter of Kibbutz Ma’abarot made a similar point: “Any choice requires a criterion [...] our criterion is our secular world view!” However, the precise meaning of this secular world view was the subject of many questions and disagreements. Another member of Kibbutz Ma’abarot expressed a willingness to include both classical and modern sources, but was opposed to reciting the *Kiddush* (the prayer over wine), which he considered a form of “blasphemy.” In the same discussion, another member described his tour of various kibbutzim, suggesting that “the finest Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies we saw had a secular tint, while the poorest in content were those with a religious character.” Contrary to the trend of embracing Judaism in its Orthodox traditional forms and the adoption of existing ready-made paradigms and Jewish themes, the refusal to borrow automatically such symbols and themes was actually perceived as the proper and more authentic Jewish option.

On other kibbutzim, however, it was the traditional practices that were perceived as revolutionary and daring. A remark by Zvi Shua reflects on the desire to avoid the rash adoption of such practices: “Precisely because of our firm desire to **inherit the tradition of our people** as much as possible, we must hone our critical tools when examining both sides (p. 514) of this tradition—the experiential and the Halakhic” (Shua 1969, 37, the words in bold appear as such in the original text). The paradox is intensified when we note that, in many cases, it was members of the younger generation who took the lead in introducing Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies and establishing a place for Jewish heritage.

Most of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies were very short, lasting no more than 10 or 15 minutes, and had a relatively common structure. They included both fixed and fluid elements (as illustrated in the examples below), including songs, recitations, excerpts from the weekly Torah portion, or a passage relating to current events in the kibbutz or on the national scene. The poet Levi Ben-Amitai, from Kibbutz Degania Bet, describes in 1967 the format of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony and offers a rationale for the selection of its permanent and variable components:

[The Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony includes] sections from the Bible and the rabbinic literature, prayer, and song, creating a conceptual whole in a manner that includes an opening, a central section, and a complementary closing section. These sections were carefully chosen in light of the truths and essence of our lives and consistent with our kibbutz way of life and our national and moral character. The Kabbalat Shabbat [...] is a ceremony; and any ceremony—as a tradition—must include a repetitive element [...] perseverance and respect [...]

Lastly, in our kibbutz way of life, which is overwhelmingly a life of activity, labor, and hurry, we can introduce the most exalted of moments—the collective Kabbalat Shabbat. It does not take much—just some Sabbath candles, calm, and light in the heart. (Shelem 1970, no page number)

In some instances we find expressions of pride at the kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat as an example of authentic and essential creativity. For example, a report from Kibbutz Hamadiya commented: “The Kabbalat Shabbat we introduced is one of the few instances of indepen-

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dent culture that we have created ourselves and this is extremely valuable.” Conversely, it is also possible to find expressions of remorse at the cultural inferiority of the kibbutzim in comparison to religious Judaism, including descriptions of visits to religious kibbutzim that found rituals combining collective life and Judaism (Ben-Gurion & Shua 1984, 355). A successful Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony was perceived as evidence of “a united and cohesive society, even if we don’t quite understand why is that so,” wrote a member from Kibbutz Ze’elim. The level of attendance at the ceremonies and their consistency were seen as yardsticks of the success of the kibbutz culture committees in performing their function.

### C4. Shaping Friday Night on the Kibbutz

While blue work shirts were ubiquitous in the kibbutz dining hall during the week, on Friday evenings the members wore white shirts. The white Sabbath shirt acquired the status of a ritual item as exemplified in the poem “Sabbath in the Kvutza” by Ben-Amitai from Degania Bet: “And the shirt whitens my back and shoulder/like a prayer shawl in a seniors home” (Ben-Gurion & Shua 1984, 372). During the week, the kibbutzniks showed a deliberate preference for disheveled dress in provocative contrast to “bourgeois” urban habits. Friday evening provided an opportunity to pay more attention to their dress. In a (p. 515) personal interview a female member of Kibbutz Sdot-Yam commented that “some women even dared to wear dresses,” something that was unusual on weekdays. Anat Hellman discusses the unique character of kibbutz dress on the Sabbath suggesting that although the clothes were more carefully arranged and made of superior materials, they did not replace or challenge the importance of the work clothes the kibbutzniks wore throughout the week (Helman 2008).

On weekdays the kibbutzniks came to the dining hall on their own or in families, sometimes in their work clothes and straight from labor in the fields, working with animals, and so forth. On Friday night, the members would arrive at the dining hall after a siesta and shower, freshly shaved, refreshed, and dressed in their Sabbath clothes (Lilker 1973, 201-202). Some descriptions liken the stream of members flooding to the dining hall to a ritual pilgrimage. Indeed, there were even those who dubbed the dining hall “a secular synagogue” (Helman, 2008, 143).

During the week members took their food from the serving trolleys and ate separately. On Shabbat everyone ate together. The food was superior in quality to that served during the week and was presented at the tables in a manner reminiscent of a home meal. The tables themselves were covered with tablecloths and sometimes decorated. In many kibbutzim each family had its regular Friday-night table, and the multigenerational aspect was clearly evident. In many kibbutzim, however, children were not present in the dining hall on Friday evenings—they returned to the children’s homes before the evening meal and welcomed the Sabbath there. On entering the dining hall the kibbutzniks saw the festive “Sabbath table,” where special Shabbat symbols were displayed as well as special thematic pictures and objects featuring the theme of the specific Sabbath. This served to emphasize the sanctification of time and space. Some kibbutzim adopted special rules re-

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lating to Friday evenings. For example, the public telephone in the dining hall would be disconnected during the ceremony and the entrance door closed when the ceremony began in order to prevent latecomers from drifting in. Other kibbutzim adopted decisions concerning the dress code such as a prohibition on entering the dining hall barefoot on the Sabbath.

All these features reflect a deliberate attempt to create a formal atmosphere with a character distinct from that of routine kibbutz life, emphasizing the value-based and spiritual themes of the gathering and of kibbutz life in general. At the end of this article I will propose a definition of the form of secular sanctity the kibbutzniks sought to create in the Sabbath meals in which the textual and ceremonial content is both Jewish and secular. These two characteristics are not perceived as contradictory.

### C5. Disagreements and Challenges Relating to the Kabbalat Shabbat Ceremonies

The use of traditional motifs, albeit in a controlled manner, provoked arguments and disagreements among the members of the kibbutzim. Some commentators saw this practice as evidence of the inferior quality of the younger generation and of a loss of direction. Yeshayahu Be'eri from the *Artzi* Kibbutz Movement regretted what he regarded as the superficial adoption of religious symbols rather than in-depth study of “our people’s history, literature, and philosophical treasures.” He saw the traditional ceremonies as a substitute for the former spiritual greatness of the kibbutzim. Another writer compared the (p. 516) manifestations of traditionalism with usually small baobab trees that can sometimes grow out of control and take control over everything around them. The reference is to the baobab trees in *The Little Prince*, a popular novel by Saint-Exupéry, which the Little Prince had to weed constantly lest they take over his small planet. In part the fears concerning the kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies centered on the concern that it represented a gradual process of surrender to nostalgia and, consequently, to Orthodox Judaism (this point is discussed in greater detail next in the section on the lighting of Sabbath candles). Responding to such arguments, Nitza from Kibbutz Sha’ar Hagolan wrote: “To those ideological, anti-religious members who fear the growth of religion and hypocritical tradition in our homes, initially in small measure and later openly—surely you do not believe that any of us will become religious.”

The ceremonies sometimes led to friction between the generations. The “Abrahams” of the founding generation occasionally opposed initiatives of the younger generation relating to Jewish heritage. In an open letter to the founders, a member of Kibbutz Ha’ogen wrote in her Kibbutz newsletter in 1979, “We’re simply members of a different generation, free from religious traumas and somehow looking for things that you had in abundance and which you rejected totally without thinking about us [...] This is a private initiative that stems from a deep sense of discomfort among the younger age group on the kibbutz.” The younger kibbutznik thus accused the founding generation of denying her contemporaries a communal experience connected to Jewish heritage. She expressed her

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concern over the disconnect from the traditional roots on the one hand, while at the same time calling for a commitment to creating a new tradition appropriate for her community.

Minutes of meetings and position papers from the kibbutzim also reflect a sense of frustration with the logistical difficulties involved in bringing together in the dining hall kibbutz members from all age groups. The gatherings caused congestion and were sometimes marred by noise and a lack of attention. Some kibbutz members felt that children who were not able to listen and wait patiently for the food should not be included in the ceremonies (and, as mentioned, in some kibbutzim the children brought in the Sabbath in the children's homes, rather than in the dining hall with the adults). Others complained about the inappropriate behavior of the European volunteers who sometimes finished off all the wine on the tables, but there were also those who emphasized the educational importance of including the entire community in the ceremony.

It was particularly difficult to identify a common denominator for the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies to ensure that they would be suitable for all age and interest groups. On the one hand, importance was attached to establishing a tradition that was repeated each week, on the other hand, there was concern that the content might become stultifying and boring. The leaders of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies stressed the importance of ensuring a high standard of singing, music playing, and recitation. Conversely, some members felt that the "homemade" character of the ceremonies, led by members who were not necessarily professionals, was what made them so important.

### C6. Lighting the Sabbath Candles

In Jewish tradition, Sabbath candles are the most salient symbol of the Sabbath and of the Jewish home in general. Jewish literature, poetry, and iconography often employ the image (p. 517) of a woman, her hair covered in a scarf, lighting the Sabbath candles in the home while praying for the wellbeing of the family members and the world.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that the custom of lighting candles became a central feature in discussions and arguments concerning the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies.

A study of the kibbutz newsletters and publications reveals lively discussions on this subject, and the various comments show that the custom often provoked strong emotions among kibbutz members, both for or against the practice. In some kibbutzim, the candles were lit in advance on the central table or in the foyer of the dining hall without any blessing. The members passed by the candles as they went into the dining hall. In other kibbutzim, lighted candles were placed on each table. Elsewhere, the candles were lit during the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony on the central table from which poems were read and the public singing was directed. Sometimes the traditional blessing was recited ("Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light"). Elsewhere new forms of blessings were used, most of which drew on the traditional text but did not include the word "God." Every kibbutz where Sabbath candles were lit developed its own tradition. In

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many cases kibbutz members composed blessings by themselves and, sometimes, blessings were borrowed and adapted from other kibbutzim.

The introduction to a collection of kibbutz blessings for lighting Sabbath candles offers some insights on this practice:

These blessings, which even in their exuberant secularism reflect transcendental longings, engage in interpretative discourse—covert and subtle—with the traditional texts relating to the beginning of the Sabbath [...] [They] embody the ongoing public approval for their permanent formula. (Garzi et al. 2000, 3)<sup>8</sup>

We will now consider two examples of kibbutz blessings for lighting the candles. The first comes from Kibbutz Palmach Tzuba. It was composed by Amnon Magen at the request of one of the educators on the kibbutz who was looking for a blessing that would be suitable for children. In our conversation Magen explained to me that it was important for him to compose a prayer that reflects the special communal, rural, and secular lifestyle of the kibbutz:

We shall bless the Sabbath  
For bodily rest and soulful calm.  
May our eyes be open to the beauty of the mountain  
And our hearts to friendship  
May our Sabbath be one of peace  
And may there be blessing in our homes.  
*Shabbat shalom* (= peaceful Sabbath)!

This blessing emphasizes the role of the Sabbath as a day of “bodily rest and soulful calm;” a day to enjoy nature and communal life. The blessing is recited by one of the women members, in turn, while her life partner adds the blessing for the wine: “Let us bless over the vine and the fruit of the vine and the produce of the field.” This blessing employs traditional liturgical language, but omits the reference to God and does not specify whom we will (p. 518) “bless.” This text is still recited on Kibbutz Tzuba, one of the few kibbutzim that still holds a Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony in the dining hall.

The second blessing was customary in several kibbutzim with minor variations. It appears to have originated on Kibbutz Degania Aleph:

Blessed are you for us, O Sabbath candle  
For a message of rest  
You have brought us.  
For your white light  
shall bring light into our dwelling places  
And purity and clarity.  
May your flame accompany us  
On hard days of labor  
In the field, the orchard, and plowed land  
Until you return and burn with us  
Next Sabbath. (Keren 1974, 122)

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This blessing focuses on the Sabbath candle itself, which is thanked for the “message of rest” it brings us. It is written in a literary and rarefied Hebrew but does not include phrases drawn from the classical liturgy. The blessing expresses a desire to extend the light and purity of the Sabbath over “hard days of labor,” thereby combining the Sabbath experience and the kibbutz way of life as a unified life system. Like other blessings of this type, these two blessings acquired canonical status.

### **C7. Changes Following the Privatization of the Kibbutzim: The End of the Classic Kabbalat Shabbat Ceremony**

Although our focus here has been on the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony during the classic era of the kibbutz, it is worth mentioning briefly the changes that have occurred since this period. These changes include the economic crisis and consequent social and cultural crisis that affected the kibbutzim from the mid-1980s, as well as the demographic growth that brought increasing social stratification, and the undermining of the values of cooperation and mutual dependence. All these factors exacerbated the technical obstacles to holding a common dinner for all kibbutz members and residents. A decline was seen in the status of the kibbutz institutions and of its cultural life including the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony in the dining hall. Even before most of the kibbutzim underwent privatization—a process that began around the turn of the century—many members had already become accustomed to eating at home. By this time, the dining hall was used mainly by temporary residents, soldiers, and volunteers. On many kibbutzim the dining hall itself was decommissioned and closed (Palgi & Reinharz 2013; Palgi & Getz 2014; Raymond, Hanneman, & Getz 2013).

As a result of these changes, the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony in the dining hall was discontinued on most kibbutzim. In many cases it was replaced by private initiatives, and Kabbalat Shabbat services are now held on numerous kibbutzim and attended by small numbers of kibbutz members. In most cases there is no reluctance to employ explicit religious language and to include traditional Jewish prayer in these ceremonies alongside (p. 519) elements specific to the kibbutz. From the earliest times several kibbutzim had synagogues, usually to serve members’ parents living on the kibbutz. But these have enjoyed a renaissance and additional prayer groups have emerged on other kibbutzim. In some places the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony has taken on an Orthodox character, sometimes conducted by people from outside the kibbutz. Elsewhere the ceremony has assumed a liberal religious character. The desire to gather together is not dissimilar to the motive that initially led to the kibbutz Kabbalat Shabbat. But in this case the participants constitute a specific group on the kibbutz rather than the entire population, as in the classic ceremony (Azulay 2008; Ofaz 2016, 163–191).



### D. Conclusion

Not only the seating arrangement—facing each other seated in long lines—nor only the fine clothing and the special flavors of the festive meal with its lovely aroma, set this evening apart from the rest of the days of the week—a magical hand draws a line of grace on the faces of the participants, the speech is more pleasant and more restful, and the topics are also out of the ordinary [...] here you feel yourself seated in the royal palace of a noble kingdom—this is the Sabbath on the Kibbutz, the Sabbath of Hatzerim.

(Keren 1974, 122)

This description illuminates the special significance of the Kabbalat Shabbat on the Kibbutz. Rituals and ceremonies, including secular ones, are characterized by an element of familiar repetition that enables the participants to anticipate the course of the event. They also include distinct roles, stylistic and specific forms of conduct, order, and organization, dramatic staging, and the focused attention of the participants. They convey a specific message designed to influence the participants. In some cases this message may have a subversive character. Even secular rituals sometimes address dimensions that go beyond the content and time of the specific event itself and contain transcendent aspects (Moore & Myerhoff 1977, 3-24). All these features appear to be present in the case of the Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies on the kibbutzim.

In this essay, I have examined an attempt to create an element of secular Jewish culture, including the quest for sanctity (even if this term was not overtly used in most cases), within the context of the secular and socialist kibbutz. I have focused on the Kabbalat Shabbat celebration held in the kibbutz dining halls, particularly between the 1960s or 1970s and the turn of the present century. These celebrations demonstrated a pronounced longing for the sublime and the transcendent and employed ancient symbols and ceremonies in a critical and selective manner. This desire to set aside sanctified time in a communal and ideological context exemplifies the search for a dimension that goes beyond the routine and mundane dimension of life and connects the past and future of the people through the use of its ancient symbols. Such experiments are not unique to the kibbutz movement, but they were manifested in this setting in their most refined form due to the unique communal structure of the kibbutz.

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(2.) The religious kibbutzim (both Orthodox and liberal) merit separate discussion, since from their earliest stages these kibbutzim adopted a positive and binding attitude toward Jewish tradition and religion.

(3.) A prominent exception in this regard is Aharon David Gordon (1956–1922), a thinker and leader from the Second Aliyah period whose philosophy does not reflect the characteristic schism between traditional Judaism and pioneering Zionism. See, Amir 1999.

(4.) The term “Shabbat” meant in the Kibbutzim the weekly day of rest that every kibbutznik was entitled to have, regardless of the actual the Sabbath day.

(5.) The general kibbutz assemblies were scheduled for Saturday evening for practical reasons, particularly the desire to enable the participation of soldiers, students, and kibbutz members who worked away from the kibbutz during the week. Lilker compares the status of the traditional Havdala service at the end of the Sabbath to the structural role of the assemblies in the kibbutz (Lilker 1973, 202).

(6.) All the following quotations, unless indicated otherwise, are from documents filed under “Shabbat” in the Shitim institutes’ archive in Beit Hashitah.

(7.) The commandment of lighting candles on the Sabbath is not mentioned in the Bible, and even in the classical rabbinical literature it is only mentioned in passing (Mishnah *Shabbat*, 2). The blessing over the candles does not appear until medieval times. Although this is considered one of the commandments of “the man and his home,” i.e. one relating to the Jewish home (Maimonides, “Laws of Sabbath,” 5:1), lighting the candles has been attributed to women and perceived as the practice of women at least since the 3rd century CE (Nulman 2002–2003).

(8.) This collection was published after most kibbutzim had stopped holding Kabbalat Shabbat ceremonies in the dining hall. It aims to empower families and groups wishing to find ways to mark the Sabbath in a ceremonial form.

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