



## Together Not Forever

TalBeery | January 30, 2012

On the morning of May 31, 2011, Daniel and I drove Michal's old grey Altima to pick up the huge UHaul truck. I got a good deal on a one-way rental to Liberty, New York, a medium-sized town in the Catskill Mountains only two hours outside the city. It was sunny and beautiful in Brooklyn and we finished packing the truck within two hours of starting.

Our group of six was splitting up, putting five intense years behind us, and I was using the long hard hours moving as a way to avoid nostalgia. The day before, I had helped Michal move her things to a storage space and Yotam's stuff to his parents' basement. Karen was going back to Toronto and wasn't taking anything but her clothes.

We had all experienced a few firsts that week. It was the first time we had divided our common possessions, the first time distance split our furniture, and the first time we separated our money. Actually, the most interesting thing on the morning of the move happened before we went to pick up the UHaul. Jane and I walked the five blocks to the bank to remove ourselves from the communal account and start fresh with a lonely joint account – just for the two of us. We sat in the generic beige-colored cubicle and signed and initialed ourselves into a new chapter of our lives. It felt strange, like revealing a secret. Lunch that day included the awkward fumbling for what he owed and what she owed, something we had successfully avoided between the six of us since October, 2006. Our group was called Orev, the Hebrew word for Raven, after the first bird sent by Noah from the ark to find land.

We first started thinking about communal living at a very early age at a summer camp run by the Socialist Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair. This organization has been responsible for the founding of almost 100 socialist Kibbutzim in Israel and continues to maintain an active presence in 19 countries internationally. It also owns one summer camp facility in Liberty, New York, and one in Perth, Ontario. As young kids we learned to share our candy, take ownership of communal cleaning responsibilities, and trust our group-mates. A few years later, as counsellors in training, we began reading texts by Fromm, Buber, Shel Silverstein, and even some Marx, discussing the problems with private property and the challenges of alternative economies. This was something we only did at our crazy camp, deep in the woods, secluded. While those summer discussions were sometimes exciting and inspiring, our daily lives in the other three seasons remained mostly unaffected.

At the time it was hard to imagine that anything real could come of it. Many generations of movement members had similar discussions over the last 85 years, and all we had to show for it was an Israeli Kibbutz movement in financial and cultural bankruptcy, completely unable to convince their society and their own children of their

relevance. I watched as the Kibbutz my grandfather founded deteriorated alongside him. What we were doing in the youth movement seemed to me like some elaborate dance, carried forward year after year by inertia alone. It angered me, and I put it out of my mind.

That is, until 2003, when our eyes were opened to new intentional communities developing in Israel. The new communes were growing quickly in direct response to the failures of older Kibbutzim. They were small, focused on providing relevant social services to the needy and developing a national network for social and economic justice. As far as I could tell, they had correctly identified the problems with larger scale institutional socialism, did not hesitate to interact with capitalist economies, and created a new model for the 21st century. The “cells” of these urban Kibbutzim were spread out across the country, and together they made an impressive impact. It was a dream realized – living an ethical activist life, winning the fight against alienation, it all seemed within reach. The remarkable thing about this new model – really an old model dusted off – was how elegant it was. In Hebrew it is described as Tikkun Adam, Tikkun Olam – Repair the Person, Repair the World. Briefly, it is understood that in order to achieve long-term systemic improvements, we should be willing to live according to our values and put equal emphasis on our internal and external activism. Internally, we should work towards trusting, honest, and supportive friendships. Externally, we should work toward more just, honest, and supportive neighborhoods and societies. Achieving external goals is useless without the internal ones and vice versa; activism must always happen in two directions, and ideally all work in either direction would be guided by our values. In practice this meant that group members spend time together working to improve their relationships, while also working together on external projects. Generally speaking, this is not a demand for a conversion to strict ideological living; it is a demand for a process, a striving for virtue and coherence.

These ideas and structures compelled us to act. The creative period that followed was full of fierce arguments, hard feelings, and inspiration. A group of over 50 youth movement leaders from Toronto and New York debated the merits, made excuses, and worked through personal ideological resistance in seminars and workshops held regularly for almost three years. All the talk finally pushed a few of us over the edge in both directions, some leaving the movement in frustration and some committing to this new direction of communal living.

Orev was of the first of eight Socialist Zionist urban communes that were established in North America. Being among the first had some very significant drawbacks. To get any sort of guidance, we had to start our life together in Israel, which brought unique challenges. We lived for eight months in a grey concrete box with no door, no kitchen, and less furniture. Most of our neighbors hated us, and we all struggled with culture shock. The guidance we got from the Israeli Urban Kibbutz Movement was at times sufficient but mostly lacking – there was a cultural and linguistic divide we tried in vain to overcome.

However, there were some great things about being abroad. Most importantly, we had time to spend. We would hold daily conversations and plan activities for ourselves multiple times each week. The activities focused on building trust and intimacy within the group, learning together, and having fun. The eight of us, five boys and three girls, would play basketball, go on hikes, read essays, and tell stories. We travelled all around the country to

talk to people and learn about the in's and out's of collective living.

We also worked together. A friend connected us to a junior high school in the nearby Arab village of Barta'a, a village divided by the Green Line so that half the families are Israeli Arabs and half are Palestinians. In this charged environment, the principal graciously invited us to teach classroom English and run an English Drama program for all four grades. We also used the opportunity to connect between the Arab and Jewish communities who had been living so close to each other but had long since lost contact.

A collective mission, we learned, is central to building and maintaining a commune. Indeed, it is central to the process of trust building and sharing on all levels. Together and by consensus we had developed the vision and took part in the day to day challenges and triumphs of a mission we all cared for. I got to see the people in my group in new lights, and it brought us closer.

We were perhaps less successful in other tasks. We naively set about sharing our money immediately, not giving time for that form of arrangement to happen more organically. Since we were all broke and had not developed sufficient trust or understanding, the strain of maintaining our collective finances wore us thin. Anxieties resulting from material scarcity transferred to our interpersonal relationships, and there were many fights. It took us time to learn how to use those conflicts constructively, to help strengthen and build understanding. This experience was big. Out of eight, six of us decided to remain members of Orev and move together to New York City where we essentially started from scratch. We immediately began working together on a new project, an association of democratic educators called Without Walls. We also took paying jobs as teachers and at the Hashomer Hatzair offices in Manhattan. We set aside a full day each week to spend together and, importantly, we avoided any explicit money-sharing.

Money sharing was approached slowly only because money was tied to so much emotion. Our fears of abandonment, anxieties related to scarcity, and our desires for independence and privacy among so much else, were all projected onto money. A fight over expensive shoes was never really an argument about shoes; it was about one person's desire for independence or beauty or acceptance, and another person's fear of scarcity or abandonment. The conflict over shoes was rife with opportunities to explore our deeper selves, but only when the primary intention was that of care for the other. Building that mutual care, we understood, was the ongoing goal of the entire project. Not shying from conflict conditioned us with the strength to be receptive and the courage to be honest. Once that was clear, sharing money became the easiest thing we did.

So we waited to share our money until it became absurd not to. It only took about six months. It happened when we realized that Karen was working full-time in a capacity that barely paid her, but her work was central to our collective mission. That was truly an enlightening moment for us, to understand for the first time that collective work happened most efficiently when we shared money. And that wasn't all: once we started sharing our money, our expenses and errands went down considerably. We bought in bulk, delegated our trips to the cleaners and the supermarket, signed up for a family cell phone plan, and helped each other out when we needed it. We planned and budgeted together. It was great to see how six heads could be much better than one.

Over the years we provided guidance for other groups like ours to form, we moved from our first apartment in Crown Heights to a larger one in Carroll Gardens, we held Shabbat dinners and holiday parties, we had Yoga and Dinner at our house every Sunday, maintained a vegetable garden in our back yard, and movie screenings in our basement. It was a great time. Eventually, though, it ran its course. As most of us approached 30, we wanted more space and more privacy. We were happy to leave the community center-feel of our life together behind. This was a great way to live communally in our 20s, and although the feeling and desire for collective living remained, we understood that we would have to go it alone before the next iteration of this structure would take hold for us, one that appropriately reflected a more mature life stage. We agreed to meet one year later, to discuss our futures once again. I, for one, have a tough time imagining myself raising a family without a strong communal structure, and look forward to finding partners for that adventure.

Today Daniel and Karen are peace activists and educators in Israel. The rest of us still live in New York City. Yotam is a full-time activist, Michal is a CUNY Law Student, and Jane and I are living and working in Brooklyn. We are all active in Occupy Wall Street, and take great pleasure sharing our experiences of communal living. This kind of living is possible and far more pragmatic than most realize. For us, it only took a bit of courage, some space, and good partners.

Tagged: co-housing, cooperative living, Features, solidarity economy

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