

The Struggle over National Ownership of Land

TRANSLATORS NOTE: Before the establishment of the State of Israel, the term 'national' (le'umi) was used in Hebrew to describe the institutions, land and capital belonging to the various Zionist organizations. The translator has used the exact translation, although the word 'public' might be more natural in English).

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The development of the kibbutz movement was made possible only through the availability of nationally-owned land of national capital. Today the kibbutzim farm close to forty percent of all the cultivated land in Israel, and all of their land is national land. The national institutions put the land and capital at the disposal of the kibbutzim, as well as of the other forms of rural settlement - moshav-ovdim, moshav shitufi (the former a rather less socialistic co-operative than the latter), and the individual farms - in order to help in the transfer of population from the towns, where most of the settlers came from, to the rural settlements and to agriculture.

The land was distributed to the settlers, with the calculation being that each family would get the amount of land that they could farm with their own labour (the typical size was twenty-five dunams of irrigated land to a family). The land was leased to the settlers for forty-nine years, with the right to renew the lease, and for a minimal annual rent.

Nationally-owned land forms the bulk of the urban land too, as well as the areas intended for future development, settlement and housing. Overall the nationally-owned land represents 92% of the land in the State of Israel, although 70% of the land is arid or rocky, and so unsuited for farming, as in the southern Negev, the Galilee Hills and other areas. In the densely populated coastal plain, privately-owned land amounts to half of the total area, and has played an influential role in the development of a real-estate trade which has been putting political pressure on state institutions in favour of selling national lands in those areas. As in rural districts, there is a tradition in urban areas too, that national lands are leased to residents at an annual rent of four percent of the land's value, or for a payment, made in advance, for forty-nine years' rent.

The principle of national ownership of land has been an accepted one in the Zionist movement from the beginning of its settlement activities, and for this purpose the movement set up a special organ, the Jewish National Fund. A national consensus existed in favour of national land ownership, in contrast to the sharp differences of opinion on other social and economic questions. The religious favoured the principle of national ownership out of respect for the age-old Jewish law that dictates that "the land must not be sold in perpetuity", and for the institutions of the shmita (sabbatical year) and yovel (jubilee year) laws that once existed to prevent people of means from buying up the land. Liberals supported the principle of national land ownership because they realized that there was a national need for settlement that, as mentioned before, was not possible without national land; in addition, they were influenced by ideas of agrarian reform and balanced urban development to prevent the development of slums. The socialists, finally, saw the principle of national land ownership as one of the most important parts of the realisation of the socialist ideal.

Since the Israeli political upheaval of 1977, and the renewal of the Right's mandate in the 1981 elections, there has been a change in the approach to the question of national land ownership. The coalition agreement signed by the parties in the present government includes three articles about allowing the sale of national lands, both rural and urban residential land.

The regulations of the JNF, which owns most of the rural land, completely forbid the sale of its lands at any time in the future. On the other hand, state lands could theoretically be freed for sale by a decision of the Knesset, although the present Israel Lands Act forbids their sale, except for one hundred thousand dunam of urban land.

If the Government does table a bill allowing the sale of state lands, one can expect a political struggle of prime social importance, since this - more than any other issue - is liable to change not only the pattern of land ownership. It could also affect the character of Israel's society for generations, for national land ownership had been one of the State of Israel's chief social achievements.

For the Kibbutz movement, this subject represents an essential part of its base, part of the foundation for its existence and its growth. Thus the expected political struggle over the sale of national lands will represent a test of the kibbutz movement's ability to develop in today's Israel.

ZEEV TSUR

The Kibbutz Vote

ALMOST ALL THE KIBBUTZIM HAVE POLLING STATIONS SO WE CAN KNOW HOW THE KIBBUTZNIKS VOTED:

UNITED KIBBUTZ MOVEMENT (Ichud and Meuchad)

LABOUR ALIGNMENT	33,328	91.9%
LIKUD	643	1.8%
TEHIA (Land of Israel)	449	1.2%
CITIZENS' RIGHTS (RATZ)	527	1.4%
SHINUY (CHANGE)	249	0.7%
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total vote	36,255	
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KIBBUTZ ARTZI

LABOUR ALIGNMENT	20,293	93.2%
LIKUD	117	0.6%
TEHIA (Land of Israel)	27	0.1%
CITIZENS' RIGHTS (RATZ)	180	0.9%
SHINUY (CHANGE)	66	0.3%
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total vote	20,293	
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KIBBUTZ HADATI (Religious Kibbutz)

NATIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTY	2,056	62.8%
LABOUR ALIGNMENT	176	0.5%
LIKUD	325	1.0%
TEHIA (Land of Israel)	301	0.9%
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total vote	3,256	
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Remaining votes were given to parties without representation in the Knesseth.

A few voters at those polling stations were not kibbutzniks (salaried teachers etc). A small number of small frontier-kibbutzim had no autonomous polling-stations. But generally speaking the percentages are accurate.

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