A Kibbutz Education

The collective farm was a powerful educational tool

Working the earth purifies the soul” was one of the many mottos at Ben Shemen, the boarding school I attended as a teenager living in what was then British Palestine. The educational experience at Ben Shemen was grounded in the soil; students had to spend two hours each day working on the collective farm.

Ben Shemen’s ingenious design called for each child to have close relations with four adults: a homeroom teacher who served as the main educator; a “house mother” who oversaw the dormitories;

a youth leader with whom students hung out after school hours; and the farm foreman under whom the children worked each day.

The four adults met regularly to coordinate their guidance of the youngsters toward what Ben Shemen considered the needed direction. Thus, if a child disobeyed one of the foremen, his house mother would learn of it and would draw on the affection the child had for her in helping him to accept the foreman’s authority.

The school’s unique structure meant that children were members of four different peer groups: their classmates of the same age; their dormmates of various ages (which in my case included an older boy by the name of Shimon Peres); the coeducational members of their youth group; and their fellow workers on the farm. The elder boys were expected to foster communal mores among their juniors.

The whole idea of Zionism was summarized for us as an inverted pyramid: in Europe, Jews were mostly middle-class intellectuals, merchants, and financiers, resting on a narrow base of relatively few Jewish blue-collar workers and even fewer farmers. We Israelis were to set the pyramid upright, by forming a strong base of farmers and workers. They relied on others to defend them; we would take our fate into our own armed hands.

At Ben Shemen one ritual came on the heels of another. One day we were raising the blue-and-white flag of a nation yet to be born. The next day we were moved by a speech by the local commander of the Hagana, the Jewish underground fighting the British occupation, who led us in taking an oath: “Never again will we go like lambs to the slaughter!” Staff and students frequently staged plays extolling the virtues of working the land and fighting for our homeland.

For me, Ben Shemen provided a powerful conversion experience. I entered as a youngster rebelling against my disciplinary mother, the loving weakness of my father, and the religious indoctrination of my school. Two years later, in 1944, I returned to my parents’ home, now comfortable with learning, authority figures, and the expectations of my peers. Above all, I departed from Ben Shemen as a young Israeli, with a sense of purpose that was as strong as it was focused: to join those lining up to fight a war of national liberation against the British occupation and to form a just Jewish society, a new Zion.

At Ben Shemen, we raised the blue-and-white flag of a nation yet to be born.

―Amitai Etzioni is a University Professor at George Washington University. This essay is excerpted from his memoir, My Brother’s Keeper: A Memoir and a Message (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).