LEAVING EDEN:
One man's quest for community in a divided land

By David Leach

In the summer of 2010, the International Communal Studies Association gathered at a college near Afula, in Israel's Jezreel Valley. The symposium coincided with the centenary of the legendary kibbutz movement, but the event held an oddly mournful air. Some American and European members had balked at visiting the country in the aftermath of the Israeli Defense Force's Operation Cast Lead and the Gaza Flotilla deaths. The heyday of the kibbutz had passed, even attached to the iron lung of tenured attention. Over the previous decade, most of Israel's socialist communes had undergone "privatization" that stripped away the radical equality on which they'd been founded.

By the end of the conference, the scholars were hungry for inspirational words about our common future rather than bemoaning our tainted present or fixating on a nostalgic past. A panel of experts discussed the communal impulse and why it matters even more today, with the dogmatists of global capitalism waving victory flags. A feel-good aura descended on the auditorium.

Then a tall delegate with a shaved head raised a hand. He was in his mid-30s but dressed younger and had been video-recording talks and tweeting highlights on a smartphone. "Hi, I'm David," he said, in a North American accent. The moderator asked him to speak up. He talked about the growing divide between the ideals of the kibbutz and the global environmental and social-justice movements. He described how "Zionism" was becoming a dirty word for a generation of international activists and progressive Jews in the Diaspora.

"I've been surprised that 100 years after Zionism, 62 years after the founding of the State, 43 years into the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, there wasn't discussion whatsoever of an Arab-Palestinian narrative. Of how some kibbutzim were built on them. Of how Arabs who tried to join kibbutzim were refused membership. Of how the plan to create an Arab model for a kibbutz was not allowed. All this talk about how we're equal and we want to live together as equals just completely ignores the fact that...."

The room ignited. People clamoured to be heard. Several demanded the microphone. "This will tear the association apart!" shouted one Israeli academic. The moderator tried to regain control. "Stop right there!" he demanded. "I think that's a big area. We could spend a whole session on how the kibbutz has responded to the Occupation. But I would like to bring us back to this room. We are all experts in community...."

Clustered in the foyer, several attendees told David he had raised a vital question that still tainted the kibbutz: How can an intentional community of equals exist in a larger society of oppression? How long can the kibbutz—and Israel—ignore the aspirations of the Palestinian people before cognitive dissonance eroded their higher ideals? And how can an uncompromising seeker of utopia find a home in our broken world?

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David Sheen seems an unlikely shit-disturber, a gentle giant with a restless heart and a buoyant optimism we can build a better world. That we *should*. A few days after the conference, we arranged to meet on the beachfront promenade of Tel Aviv. Even in a crowd, David stands out. He towers six inches above the average Israeli and eschews beach-wear for the radical chic of the urban anarchist. An Arab *keffiyeh* hung around his neck, a Mao cap perched on his bald dome.

Our rendezvous was next to the boarded-up shell of the Dolphinarium, a once-thriving nightclub. I asked what happened to it. David told me it was the site of a suicide bombing, in June 2001, at the start of the Second Intifada. A Palestinian bomber had walked into a queue of young Russian immigrants and detonated a belt of explosives. Twenty-one bystanders died; another 120 were injured by shrapnel. In 2003, Israel began to erect its Security Fence, osten-

sibly to prevent similar attacks. Nine years after the blast, Tel Aviv had sunk back into its days of languor, its nights of forgetting. And yet the Dolphinarium remained a derelict monument to the past.

David suggested we meet his journalist friends at a cafe on Ben Yehuda Street, so we dodged strollers and talked about his personal quest for the Holy Grail of community. He used the C-word with solemnity, as though "community" were as solid as the gold standard, the only thing of true value in a society that reduced every relationship to a commodity. And yet finding community, for David, had proven as elusive as tracking down El Dorado in the rain forests of the New World.

Talking to David felt like stepping back in time and meeting a kibbutz pioneer. He had the same intellectual intensity, I imagined, as the young Jewish *chalutzim* from Eastern Europe who had founded Degania, the original kibbutz, and built a new society from scratch. Like many of these pioneers, David grew up in a conservative, middle class Jewish family that ate kosher and went to synagogue on *shabbat*—in Toronto, in David's case, rather than Tsarist Russia or Poland. He was a bookish child with an artsy bent and a future guided by his bourgeois upbringing: a professional job in the city, big family, bigger house.

His father had been born in Israel; David had visited many times and spoke Hebrew, so he moved to Tel Aviv at age 25 to escape Canada's harsh winters and start a career as a graphic designer. But the art of advertising felt barren, and Tel Aviv's relentless entrepreneurialism lost its lustre, too. He longed to be an artist. Instead he found himself shilling for weapons-makers, pornography stores, and—even worse for a vegan—producers of *foie gras*. "How do I get out of this system?" he wondered. "How do I live a life that doesn't involve these moral quandaries?" His instinct was to get his hands dirty to cleanse his soul. "I had a romantic idea of going back to the land," he recalled. "I wanted to work in agriculture or horticulture, something to do with nature."

David was a creature of the city, however, and knew little about farming. He hadn't even joined the Scouts or Jewish youth groups as a kid. In Israel, he approached the Kibbutz Movement, where officials gauged his suitability for joining a community with a battery of psychological tests. "They weren't able to discover my inherent axe-murdering tendencies!" he joked. He was a young, healthy, well-educated, highly skilled, ideologically motivated immigrant from North America. He toured a different kibbutz every other weekend. Communities with open doors, however, tended to be in demographic decline or economic crisis and desperate for young blood. David had no interest in a kibbutz that had abandoned its socialist ideals. "I was looking for a place that had not gone through a privatization process—and wasn't planning on it."

He moved to his first kibbutz and marveled at desert scenery straight out of *Lawrence of Arabia*. There, David learned about permaculture and fell under the spell of a new religion:

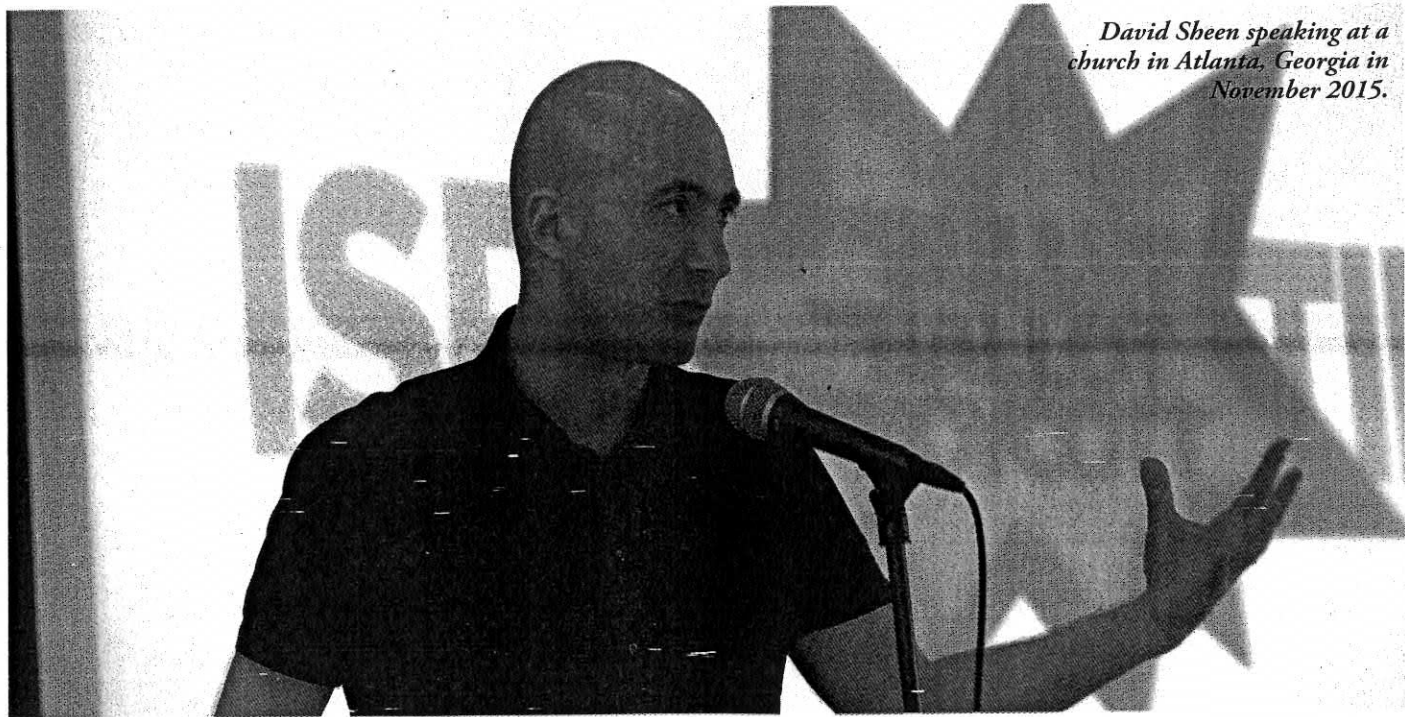*David Sheen speaking at a church in Atlanta, Georgia in November 2015.*

ecological architecture. "It really moved me," he recalled. "I ended up spending the next decade being obsessed with it."

He lived on the kibbutz for nearly six months. One weekend, he caught a bus to Tel Aviv for a wedding. In his absence, the

community that was ecological and *really* socialist—not just socialist for the Jews."

Before leaving the kibbutz, David had articulated his evolving political philosophy to his boss, who gave him a copy of *The Dispossessed* by the science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin. In her novel, a tribe of austere anarchists live as colonists on a moon that circles a planet ruled, in stark contrast, by a decadent capitalist society. David felt inspired again. He read everything he could about anarchism and discovered a philosophical tradition deeper than the stereotypes of bomb-tossers and punk-rock anthems. "These are the principles that are important to me," he realized. "This is an accurate description of how the world should be." The self-sufficient cooperative society of equals mirrored ideas in Peter Kropotkin's classic manifesto *Mutual Aid*, the blueprint for the early kibbutz movement. In Israel, a hundred years of compromises had eroded these ideals. Da-

> ## "I wanted there to be a community that was ecological and *really* socialist—not just socialist for the Jews."

kibbutz secretary posted a notice, called a meeting, and oversaw a vote in favour of an issue that troubled David: foreign labour. The original kibbutz movement had been built on the philosophy of "self-labour": neither exploiter nor exploited. However, over the years, many kibbutzes had outsourced farm labour to Arab hired hands, new Jewish immigrants, foreign volunteers and, more recently, Thai guest workers, who were often housed—and sometimes treated—like second-class citizens. Guest workers were a major issue on kibbutzes in this area. Many members felt the agricultural branches couldn't stay profitable without cheap labour. At the kibbutz, David had argued against the idea. In a kibbutz democracy, any important decision was usually advertised a week in advance, so members could mull the consequences before the vote in the general assembly. But this time, the decision happened in mere days. David felt betrayed.

"Many people's commitment to human rights and against racism ranked lower than economic concerns," he said. "And the way of getting that decision approved was anti-democratic. What depressed me was that even in a community of 150 people there was still political manipulation. I realize that in a system of millions there will be a lot of abuse. That's why I want to live in community, so that we can have human-level interactions with each other and honest dialogue, not bureaucratic interactions. But that wasn't the case here."

After the decision to allow guest workers, he couldn't live on the kibbutz in good conscience. He wrote a long, emotional letter and left copies in every member's mailbox. Then he walked out of the desert Eden.

"At first, I didn't know what the solution was," he admitted. "I wanted there to be a

vid realized he was frustrated living in a society that wasn't—and didn't want to be—as good as it could be. He wanted utopia in *his* lifetime, not his grandchildren's.

David returned to North America and apprenticed with reclusive eco-building gurus in mud-walled, straw-baled, solar-paneled, compost-toileted off-the-grid lairs. He learned how to hand-craft "cob" houses. He studied "biomimicry," the design philosophy that mirrors, rather than dominates, its natural surroundings. A friend donated a video camera, so David recorded interviews as he travelled around the world to the meccas of natural building: the cob mansions of Dorset, England; the millennium-old rock-hewn cities in Ethiopia; the straw-roofed villages and mud mosques of Ghana; the adobe counterculture "earthships" in New Mexico. He edited the footage into a documentary extolling what he called "uncompromising ecological architecture." He had seen the future. And it was made of mud.

In 2006, he returned to Tel Aviv and organized a collective of eco-communards to start an off-the-grid settlement. For a hundred years, Zionist organizations had helped young Jews colonize the Promised Land. But a band of anarchists who rejected corporate capitalism? No thanks—not any more. David's collective of Israeli eco-anarchists faced a dilemma. "We were too politically radical to get funds from the state, nor would some of us have wanted to," he said. "But there wasn't a critical mass of us to start from scratch."

Then David remembered visiting Kibbutz Samar, in the Arava Desert. He returned to give a talk there about ecological building, stayed for 10 days, and asked if he could remain longer. Samar had been founded in 1976 as a rejection of authority and bureaucracy—of the state, of the family, of the old kibbutz hierarchy. Its members were true anarchists. The kibbutz's economy was built on organic date plantations and members had rejected the "need" to recruit cheap Thai labour for the harvesting. It was perhaps the last kibbutz in Israel to hold to the original Zionist ideal of self-labour: *Do the work yourself or not at all.*

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Other communities had embraced a libertarian philosophy of almost total freedom, both in Israel and abroad, but few lasted more than a year or two. "Samar deserves its place in the communal equivalent of the *Guinness Book of World Records*," observed Daniel Gavron, in 2000, after a visit. Not everyone was impressed by Samar's woolly ways. In Tel Aviv, I asked a kibbutz leader and former member of the Israeli Parliament about the anarchists in the Arava Valley. "Samar is not a kibbutz!" he exclaimed. "They're like Bedouins in the desert!"

Just the idea of Samar divided people. The kibbutz had been founded by young members from traditional kibbutzes disillusioned with the ideological drift of their homes. Samar's founders declined an offer to settle in the occupied Golan Heights and travelled instead to the desert on a quest for wisdom. Here, away from prying eyes, they could discard their parents' mistakes. Here, communal living would give people more freedom, not less. What they wanted was a blank slate—both freedom *to* and freedom *from*, in the famous distinction by philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Freedom to express their better selves. Freedom from bureaucratic rules. After retiring from public life to Kibbutz Sde Boker in the Negev Desert, David

Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding prime minister, had written: "For those who make the desert bloom there is room for hundreds, thousands, and even millions." The pioneers of Samar took him at his word.

It's hard to separate fact from legend in the story of Samar. On the kibbutz, no single authority, no guru set the rules or even said there were no rules. Such *laissez faire* anarchism had been tried in communes and hippie outposts throughout North America and Europe. It usually imploded after a few years, when finances ran low and emotional tensions ran high. Love might be free; not much else was. Somehow the members of Samar made it work. They did away with the weekly work schedule and job rotation. Members decided when and where they laboured; if a kibbutznik needed help on a job, to milk the cows or pick the dates or scrub the kitchen, he or she made a request, stated the case, and took whomever would come. Usually, the work got done. Samar's financial philosophy was equally radical. In the traditional kibbutz system, every member received a tiny allowance while the kibbutz paid for living expenses. To buy anything extra, a member had to plead to the finance committee; the result of the vote was final. The tense, political, and often humiliating experience made adult members feel like pre-teens asking their parents for a raise in allowance.

Samar said to hell with that. If members couldn't trust each other, their community was doomed, so they agreed to keep an open cash box. If someone needed to take a trip to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, they could go into the dining room, flip open the lid, and—if enough money was there—remove the bus fare and maybe a few shekels for a falafel. The box was refilled with profits from the date orchards or other enterprises. If the cash box was bare, everyone made do.

The common purse was a giant middle-finger to the Tragedy of the Commons—the thought experiment that assumes when a resource can be accessed collectively, people will devour more than their fair share until the resource has been squandered. Conservatives believe the Tragedy proves our genes really are selfish and we should accept capitalism as natural law; some environmental activists use the Tragedy's outcome to argue for state intervention before we consume all our natural resources. Samar's experiment in radical trust cast doubt on the theory.

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On Samar, David Sheen found an outlet for his restless energies amid the social, cultural, and political life of the desert commune. He held slideshows and films, talks and concerts. Inspired by his experiences at the Burning Man Festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, he tried to organize a similar event on Samar. He made an immediate impression on the kibbutz—and not always a welcome one.

David understood his communal faux pas. "What I did was the equivalent of walking up to your face and screaming. In the city, you have to be loud for anyone to hear you—there are so many competing messages. In a community, they don't have huge billboards, you don't have the same level of intense dialogue and debate. It's quiet. It's the desert. You have to be more measured in your discourse. Some people felt that I had come to the community and started preaching. Some people felt that I was talking too loud. Other people felt I had no right to do it at all. They said, 'Only after living here for seven years do you have a right to start talking about your opinions.'" Even an anarchist utopia has rules, apparently. "Obviously, I can't abide that," said David. "That's stymieing voices. That's not cool. It's imperial to say, 'We'll take your labour but not your personal opinions.'"

When David applied for full membership, residents of Samar debated his suitability, whether his personality felt simpatico with the kibbutz. His friends could not sway the skeptics. The vote failed. David could remain living there as a non-member. But he didn't want to live in a village where he felt the majority of his neighbours didn't value his voice and might not even want him around. It was a painful discovery. After a decade of searching, David

found his personal utopia, an organic Eden in the desert of Israel that was more than a mirage. Samar had only one problem: the kibbutz didn't want David.

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David still lives in Israel. He copy-edited for the left-wing newspaper *Ha'aretz* and produced documentaries and YouTube exposés. He fights the rightward political tilt in Israel and gives presentations around the world about his experiences. During the "J14" economic protests in the summer of 2010, when young activists camped out in Tel Aviv and 500,000 people marched the city's streets, David chronicled how even this mass revival of progressive ideals avoided any mention of the Occupation. His country continued to frustrate his ideals.

"Why do you keep being drawn back to Israel?" I asked. He seemed locked in a love-hate relationship that bordered on the codependent. "Do you consider yourself a Zionist? An eco-Zionist?"

"That's a loaded question," he replied. "Today, there is a new parlance. Yes, there is Zionist. There is also anti-Zionist. There is also non-Zionist. There is also post-Zionist."

David professed to be an "ambi-Zionist"—a Jew who has not firmly committed to Zionism, non-Zionism, or anti-Zionism. "Someone who is still on the fence," he explained, "because they feel there are some positive elements to the word and some negative elements to it."

David still felt the tug of family and cultural history in Israel. It fueled his extended

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argument with the divided nation. "I do feel a connection to the land." He laughed. "Call it education, call it brainwashing."

A year and a half after I first met David Sheen, I was back in Israel and curious if he had made any progress in his quest for community. He and his now-wife had moved from Tel Aviv into a rental unit in Jaffa, so I reunited with him under the clock tower at

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the entrance to the Old City. David was shooting activist videos about racist incidents against Ethiopian immigrants and the internment of Sudanese refugees. His wife was Jamaican-Canadian and often felt uncomfortable walking the streets of Tel Aviv. "She thinks that people here look at her like she is ugly," said David. "Over time, that wears you down."

The couple was planning to move to Dimona, a town of 33,000 in the Negev Desert. Dimona was also home to Israel's nuclear facilities and a community of so-called "Black Hebrews." In 1969, the 40 original Black Hebrews followed their charismatic leader from Chicago to Israel. They were African Americans who believed they belonged to the lost tribe of Judah and lobbied for citizenship under Israel's Law of Return. More followed and stayed illegally in the country. They forged a syncretic religion from Torah laws, African traditions, and their own unique holidays. Orthodox rabbis never recognized their claims of ancestry; only a handful of the 3,000 residents ever received citizenship. In 1984, the Speaker of the Israeli Parliament threatened to evict them with force; two years later, a standoff with the Israeli Army nearly ended in bloodshed. And yet the Black Hebrews remained in Dimona until they became an accepted, if eccentric, facet of the nation's multicultural mosaic. "Your community is beloved in Israel," said President Shimon Peres on a visit in 2008. "Your destiny is our destiny." Their gospel choir tours Israel and overseas, while the locally grown, organic, vegan diet of the Black Hebrews has become so fashionable that they opened restaurants in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. A banner above their gate announces to new arrivals: *Welcome to the Village of Peace.*

"If you're talking utopian communities," David told me, "at least in Israel, I can think of few that are so exemplary."

Well, except for one hitch, according to David: the Black Hebrews remain a patriarchal cult of personality that treats women as second-class citizens. "They're old school," he said. "There are things that we can't accept." He and his wife were considering how to enjoy their company without joining the settlement. "If we move next to them, we could have the advantage of having them as a community—without living by their rules."

The injustices he witnessed on a daily basis in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, his own financial insecurity and awareness of getting older made David philosophical about the receding possibilities of utopia. Can we ever reframe how we live as a society to be more fair and less damaging to our planet?

"I used to think we could change *everywhere*—that we could create a small fractal to change everything. Then I thought, at least we could create something that could be a refuge from all the shit. Now, I'm at the point where I don't think I'm capable of doing that. Not for a community and not even for myself. So I'm willing to accept less shitty. Less cesspool in my life—that's my goal right now."

"That's not exactly a good bumper sticker," I suggested. *"A Life Less Shitty."*

He laughed. "I shouldn't be a motivational speaker!"

The road from ideal to compromise, from utopia to suburbia, is a well-worn path. I'd seen it repeated on every kibbutz I'd visited; it pulls at every alternative community that dreams of a creating a perfect society in an imperfect world. Building community will always be ad-hoc and messy. David Sheen's frustrated quest for a flawless city upon the hill to call home was hardly unique. It reflected the century-long plot arc of an entire movement.

He nodded at the suggestion. "It really is the evolution of the kibbutz." ❧

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