After the 1970s the kibbutz movement suffered an irreversible and downward decline which steadily exacerbated as time went on. There were several reasons for the kibbutz fall from favor: Right-wing governments for the first time controlled the Israeli political scene and had their own agenda for development (the kibbutzim were traditionally leftist). Kibbutz collective ideals were beginning to be perceived not only by outsiders, but even by their own second and third generations. Scandal, a leadership crisis, the fact that agriculture alone could not financially sustain the kibbutz, and mounting debts all contributed to tarnishing the image of a system whose life-style, ideology and basic premises were increasingly questioned and problematic.

Ostensibly, utilizing kibbutz facilities to attract tourism was an ideal combination. Kibbutz Gvanim, situated opposite the Sea of Galilee, offering breath-taking views and grassy expanses, located in an area of tourist attractions, with plentiful space and free land to construct a guesthouse which would offer an insider’s look at kibbutz life and ideals, could actually claim that it was developing a strategy to bolster esteem for the kibbutz and for the Land of Israel.

Kibbutz Gvanim was one of the first kibbutzim to pursue kibbutz tourism in the 1960s; subsequently the trend spread as financial difficulties increased and kibbutz tourism developed into a burgeoning heritage and history industry including pioneer settlement museums and bed-and-breakfast cottages on the kibbutz. By the 1990s, tourism-related revenues accounted for over 60 percent of Kibbutz Gvanim’s income.

The most salient feature of Dr. Grossman’s account of developments over the 40 years of tourist activity is that even though it became increasingly clear to the kibbutz that the activity and the income were a necessity, kibbutz members remained ambivalent, and there was internal conflict based on their inherent opposition to this project. From the earliest debates, members of the kibbutz stipulated that the type of tourist the kibbutz should attract would be working-class tourists and hikers, and not rich tourists. They decided that the guesthouse should be located 250 meters from the kibbutz and deliberated about planting trees to maintain the tourists’ distance from the kibbutz. After a year of ideological argument, the project was adopted.

The members’ ambivalence found expression at the dedication ceremony of the guesthouse in November 1962. The cornerstone scroll declared that the Sea View Guesthouse would bear the cultural and social atmosphere of...
Israel and the kibbutz, would promote love of the Galilee, of the kibbutz way of life and of “our country.” While highlighting the national and educational objectives, points out Dr. Grossman, the scroll makes reference to broadening the economic base of the kibbutz and providing a source of livelihood and employment for members.

From Dr. Grossman’s account, it was not until thirty years later, when Gvanim’s members saw the financial collapse and demise of other kibbutzim and the looming threat of total financial crash in their own kibbutz, with external professional financial advisors engaged to guide them, that they actually internalized the necessity to run their community as a for-profit industry for their own survival.

To anyone who grew up in the capitalist environment outside of a kibbutz, the rules of the game, the foundations of the world of business, the necessity to focus on services, quality, dedication to the satisfaction of the client and to the dynamics of making money are so plainly obvious, that the decision to establish a business in a kibbutz would have been perceived as an understanding that business rules would naturally apply. But the foundations of kibbutz values and of business values were so inherently conflicting that, while the tourist operation was allowed to function, it was more than three decades until it was more than tolerated.

During those three decades, kibbutz members who worked in the tourist project were made to feel that their work was easier and less valued than that of their agricultural counterparts. Kibbutz members, protesting the lack of a clubhouse-recreation center, frequented the guesthouse as their own leisure spot, cut flowers from the guest house garden to decorate their homes and made the workers in the guesthouse feel socially isolated and not contributing members of the community.

Utilizing the dining room facilities of the kibbutz, which made good financial sense, met the wrath of some of the veteran kibbutz members, who resented the possibility that tourists might be getting better food or that tourists might view them as “monkeys in a cage,” or that they might have to relinquish their seats for the benefit of tourists. This, at a time when members could take food home if they genuinely found the tourist arrangement problematic. While the kibbutz dining room in all kibbutzim had once been the center of social life and togetherness, after food budgets were privatized in many kibbutzim, members made their own decisions about where they would eat and when – one more indication of ambivalence regarding the collective underpinnings of the kibbutz. Says Dr. Grossman, “These confrontations transpired without tourist involvement. They were between the staff and a small number of members more as a demonstrative expression of their rights and less of genuine grievances.”

Tourists of the guest house were, of course, not working class hikers, but middle class Israelis and visitors from abroad, and the economic success was eventually a source of pride. It is a credit to those kibbutz members who, despite the flack that they took from their peers and the lack of support and understanding, persisted in building up the tourist service for the benefit of all kibbutz members.

Eventually the tables turned, with tourist branch employees complaining that the work was extremely demanding, that they were putting in extremely long hours and were tired of supporting kibbutz members who didn’t work. By the end of the 1990s, the finances of many kibbutzim were catastrophic, and Gvanim was among them. Professional consultants had to create a new financial basis for the kibbutz structure with graded wages for those members whose work was profitable and minimum wages to non-productive branches. The tourism workplace gained special status and became more central and necessary to kibbutz life. And most insulting – agriculture would be administered like tourism, as a private, for-profit industry. Now the tourist workers became the target of envy.

The early concept of the kibbutz was the creation of a “tourist bubble,” distinct from the kibbutz area, which would maintain distance so as to preserve its pure values and not taint the social, cultural, ideological and organizational fabric of the kibbutz. This concept failed, not because the tourist industry was corruptive, but because the ideological fabric of the kibbutz offered no mechanism for financial longevity, and, the refusal of its members to see the writing on the wall in this different world and recognize and acknowledge the necessity earlier was devastating for many kibbutzim and catastrophic for many kibbutz members.

Dr. Grossman traces a world of transition – a function of political, financial and social development and change in Israel that reduced the distinctive ideals, values and principles of the kibbutz of Israel’s formative years to a struggling entity, fighting for survival 50 years later.