The kibbutz is a communal form of settlement that grew conjointly with the establishment of Jewish presence in Palestine and served as an effective instrument for the Zionist project of colonization and statehood. The kibbutz movement in Israel is also the largest and longest-standing realization of the idea of egalitarian, communal living. Its 100 years of existence were marked by rapid and dramatic changes: from small groups of young idealist settlers in remote locations to an organized, prospering and politically-powerful movement; from strict adherence to principles of absolute equality to the current process of “privatization” of many kibbutzim; from a model society, envied by many in Israel and abroad, to a minority that is despised by wide sectors in Israeli society. Along the way, the kibbutz movement created an innovative and controversial system of child rearing, developed a secular Jewish culture, and nurtured unique artistic expression through literature, music, visual arts and architecture.

This course will follow the history of the kibbutz within the historical context of Jewish settlement in Palestine and the Israeli state. We will examine the ideals and practices of the kibbutz, both in relation to the history of communes in Europe and the US, and through comparison among the three different kibbutz movements in Israel. Special attention will be given to child rearing and education, the place of women, the viability of communal economy, social dynamics in direct, egalitarian democracy, and culture in all its expressions. Literary works and films will be used to help us understand life in the kibbutz and to examine how the kibbutz was seen by observers in Israel at different times. The course will combine lectures and discussions and students will be expected to do the readings in preparation for class sessions.