

The sad decline of the residents' committee

Once, not so long ago, an apartment building's maintenance was handled by a group of neighbors working together. These days, no one wants to know about such things.

By Arik Mirovsky | Sep.19, 2005 | 12:00 AM (Haaretz English Edition)

It was a pathetic scene: the head of a Hadera apartment building residents' committee (va'ad bayit) in the process of moving out stood helpless before his longtime neighbors, who refused to accept the committee file from him. "People offered childish excuses for why they were refusing to take the file and cashbox from me and explaining that transferring the file to them wouldn't automatically make them the new committee didn't help. They didn't want to have anything to do with the committee."

At the last minute, a young resident, who had also decided to become the new head of the residents' committee, agreed to take the file. This is not the only story indicating a sharp drop in the status of residents committees.

Such committees, or in legal talk, "representative committee of residents of an apartment building" have been in crisis for years. "This is a body whose effectiveness depends on social conventions and sanctions that can be imposed on problematic residents and therefore it was appropriate in the Israel of 30-40 years ago," says urban planner and legal expert, Prof. Rachel Alterman, of the Technion's Institute for Urban and Regional Research. "Today, as social cohesion gets shakier, these committees have become less effective and as soon as the residents need to deal with anything beyond the routine weekly cleaning of the stairwell, such as tarring the roof, the problems begin."

In an apartment building in the Krayot, a doctor living on the ground floor "decided" he was not willing to pay for tarring the roof. All attempts to persuade him were of no avail and the man who headed the committee did not deal with the matter. The rest of the residents shared the cost and residents of the upper floors covered the difference. Later on, those residents said they were deducting their extra expenses from the monthly fees they pay and that they would not share in the cost of sewerage repairs. Not long afterward, the committee head gave up and announced his resignation. Today, the building has no residents' committee and no one seems to care.

The disputes between residents' committees and problematic neighbors are increasing. Ha'aguda Letarbut Hadiur, the association for better housing, says there has been a steady rise in the number of calls they are receiving from committees that are fed up with phoning residents who are unwilling to pay maintenance fees. The excuses for not paying up are familiar - "the committee doesn't do enough," "the fees are too high," "the stairwell isn't clean" and so on. "For some reason, the same people who

demand that the committee do more and clean more, and constantly complain, are the last ones to pay," said a committee chairman in Netanya.

"People are willing to volunteer for this job, with no compensation, in order to improve the quality of life in the building. Suddenly they have to put up with long stories that drain their time and energy and make them wonder why they took this on," says a committee head in Haifa.

Indeed, many buildings remain without a committee, and in other cases, the person who agrees to do the job is a retiree who does his best to keep the building clean - but not much more than that. The result is a decline in the general maintenance of many apartment buildings.

New projects going up all over Israel consist of complex, state-of-the-art buildings that are high-maintenance, and there they often prefer to hire the services of a management company. This practice, which was imported to Israel from abroad - initially only in luxury projects and later also in more popularly priced projects - is just in its early stages and still far from being satisfactory.

"The term 'management company' is much more attractive to Israelis than the old-fashioned residents' committee. People say to themselves: 'Great. Until now it was hard and unpleasant to collect money from neighbors for the committee. From now on, an outside company will do it so let people fight with them.' Many times it ends with a crisis," says the director of the Be'er Sheva branch of the better housing association, Moti Gofer.

In quite a few cases, residents found the management company unsatisfactory and ceased working with it after a time. Gofer tells of an extreme case in Be'er Sheva's Ramot neighborhood, where residents who dared to complain to the management company director about the quality of the work were beaten up and filed a complaint with the police. A similar case occurred in Ashdod, the association says.

"The residents' committees do indeed have problems, but contrary to the popular theories, they are not the result of the complex maintenance requirements of new buildings nor of the aging committee members," says the housing association's director general, Reuven Tzadok. "I can say that in many cases, management companies do not maintain the buildings better than the residents' committees do. I can also attest from my own experience that committee members are not always retirees who have trouble dealing with recalcitrant neighbors. In meetings we hold, I also meet young and energetic committee heads."

So what causes the committees' problems? Tzadok agrees with the claim that Israeli society, which is fragmented and individualistic, makes the committees' work difficult. "You see it very well in the new cities of Shoham and Modi'in, where people from all over the country have moved into apartment buildings and brought with them their crazy ideas and their principles."

He also agrees that the ongoing recession has intensified the problem. However, he feels that "the residents' committee is not finished. Specifically because of the great disappointment over the work of many management companies, many are realizing that there is no alternative to the people living in the building. I think that it is possible to restore to the residents' committee the respect it deserves using legal means," says Tzadok.

First and foremost, Tzadok believes, the Apartment Building Law needs to be amended. "This is a law with as many holes as Swiss cheese, which is not only outdated but also patched together, with each person involved promoting the things that are important to him. That's why it doesn't provide solutions for many problems troubling residents of apartment buildings in our time, such as debts owed by tenants renting apartments in these buildings. The time has come to review the law in depth and update it and to strengthen the residents' committee - and also to compensate the committee members. Currently, committee members can receive an exemption from paying monthly fees only with the residents' unanimous consent," says Tzadok.

The question is whether that is indeed the solution. Some feel that the processes under way in Israeli society are determining the fate of residents' committees. They feel the correct approach to proper maintenance of apartment buildings is to increase enforcement power for the management companies, as well as creating regulations requiring them to adhere to high standards.

A survey conducted by the Tena Project Management company in new buildings in Rishon Letzion, Netanya and Petah Tikva found that 90 percent of the new buildings used management companies and not traditional committees. According to the survey, the incentive for using a management company is the buildings' complex systems, mainly the elevators.

Accountant Doron Kaufman, who did the survey, says that to set a professional standard among management companies, a registered association called Ha'aguda Hayisraeli Lenihul Batim U' mivnim B'Yisrael (The Israeli Association for Building Management) has been established. Among other things, the association is seeking to promote standards and legislation that are still lacking in the field.

"The old version of the residents' committee is dead and most new high-rise buildings have outside management companies, with the committee acting as a middleman between residents and the company. Beyond that, even in old buildings it seems that the committees are not functioning and the result is considerable neglect. People today have less spare time, neighborly relations have changed dramatically, we don't know our neighbors any more and the institution of residents' meetings, which was common 10 or 20 years ago, is now a thing of the past.

"That's why I don't see any way back, and it seems that large institutions feel the same way. In Tel Aviv, for example, it is common to require residents to appoint a management company in an apartment's purchase contract. That is a positive and practical approach," says Kaufman.