

Mazkeret Batya

By Peter Abelow

The past 125 years have seen the miraculous return of our people to our ancient homeland—Eretz Yisrael. This is nothing short of astounding when you consider that in 1880 there were approximately 10,000 to 20,000 Jews in Ottoman Palestine, less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the world Jewish population. The first waves of *aliyah*, from 1881 to 1903 (known as the First Aliyah or the Farmer's Aliyah), saw an additional 25,000 Jews arrive, mainly from Eastern Europe. In 1897, Theodor Herzl dared to dream that within fifty years there would be a Jewish state and, indeed, by the time the State of Israel was declared on May 14, 1948, the Jewish population had risen to 600,000. At the time, 5 percent of the world's Jews lived in Israel; today that number stands at 40 percent!

Located southeast of Tel Aviv, Mazkeret Batya, currently a charming

village with a population of 10,000, came into being during the First Aliyah. Of the many generous individuals who made the First Aliyah possible, there is probably no one whose name is more recognized than "*hanadiv hayadua*"—the "known benefactor," Baron Edmond (Binyamin) de Rothschild. The Baron, the son of Jacob and Batya, was instrumental in funding many of the twenty-eight new *moshavot* (settlements) built during the First Aliyah, including Zichron Yaakov, Binyamina, Bat Shlomo and Mazkeret Batya, all named in honor or in memory of members of his family. Many of the new immigrants who arrived during this *aliyah* were Religious Zionists, members of the Chovevei Tzion ("Lovers of Zion") and BILU ("*Beit Ya'akov Lechu Venelchah*") movements, inspired by the goal of working the land. During this period, 90,000 acres of land were purchased, thereby launching Israel's future as an agricultural society.

One of the leaders of Chovevei Tzion was Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever. Born into a rabbinic family in Vilna in 1824, he was ordained in the famous yeshivah of Volozhin and became the

rabbi of Bialystok, Poland, in 1883, a position he held until his death in 1898.

In September of 1882, Rabbi Mohilever met with Baron de Rothschild in Paris, where they laid plans for the establishment of a new *moshavah* to be called Ekron. At this crucial meeting, Rabbi Mohilever secured the funding to purchase the land and support the early pioneers. He returned to Poland and on October 19 recruited ten pioneering families, each of whom signed a letter indicating their readiness to move and their willingness to refund the money provided to cover the costs of travel and of reestablishing themselves. The ten heads of the families were to leave within four weeks, with their families to follow at a later date. Fittingly, they were recruited during the week of *parashat Lech Lecha*, when we read of Avraham Avinu's *aliyah*. The men left Europe, most appropriately, during the week of *parashat Vayeitze* and arrived in the port of Jaffa on December 14, 1882. Once in Palestine, they underwent training in farming for a year, sponsored by the Baron, and began to work the land the following November. The Baron himself

The Mazkeret Batya Historical Museum tells the story of the town through photos, documents and exhibits. Photos: www.sassontiram.com

Mr. Abelow is a licensed tour guide and the associate director of Keshet: The Center for Educational Tourism in Israel. Keshet specializes in running inspiring and enjoyable tours of Israel for congregations, schools and families. Mr. Abelow can be reached at 972-54-313-3712 or at peter@keshetisrael.co.il.

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Nina Rave

PHONE: 201, 939, 5100 ~ FAX: 201, 939, 5222



The Beit Knesset Hagadol (The Great Synagogue), a gift of the Rothschild family in 1928. During the end of the British Mandate, members of the Haganah hid weapons under the synagogue's bimah.

visited Ekron in 1886, and renamed the *moshavah* “Mazkeret Batya” in memory of his mother, who had recently died.

The pioneers faced many trials and tribulations in the early years. But, despite all the obstacles, these Religious Zionists managed to maintain their zeal for their mission—to resettle and to work the Land. Slowly they turned Mazkeret Batya into a successful enterprise. However, things were not always easy, and there were occasional clashes with the Baron’s officials, who had come to oversee the agricultural endeavors. One of the most contentious disagreements occurred in 1889.

During the two-thousand years of living in the Diaspora (*galut*), the Jewish people had yearned to be able to fulfill the *mitzvot* that were dependant upon being in the Land of Israel. In 1889, with the arrival of the first *shemittah* year since the First Aliyah, the religious pioneers were presented with a long-awaited opportunity. The mitzvah of *shemittah* requires letting the land lie fallow for a year, and the *moshavot*—whose agricultural enterprises were barely getting off the ground—were confronted with a halachic dilem-

ma. The founding fathers of Mazkeret Batya were therefore involved in the ensuing dispute. Many aligned themselves with the Rabbanut of Jerusalem, which insisted that *shemittah* be strictly observed *kedat u’kedin* (with all of its stringencies). The Baron and his representatives, on the other hand, felt strongly that economic considerations mandated the more lenient approach

advocated by other Torah authorities (including Rabbi Mohilever) authorizing the sale of the land to a non-Jew (“*beter mechirah*”). In the end, Mazkeret Batya, in defiance of the Baron, became one of the few *moshavot* that strictly observed the *shemittah* that year; its farmers refused to work the land, choosing to endure the economic consequences of that decision.

This year, Mazkeret Batya, a mixed community with both religious and non-religious residents, is celebrating its 125th anniversary. Even as the village is turning into a modern town, Rothschild Street, the main street, still maintains some of the charm and old-village character of a century ago. Interestingly, some of the residents are seventh-generation direct descendents of the first ten pioneering families.

Mazkeret Batya is located just off Route 411, near Rechovot and the BILU Junction. The small Mazkeret Batya Historical Museum, located at 40 Rothschild Street in one of the original buildings from 1883, tells the story of the town through photos, documents and exhibits. The museum is dedicated to the memory of Eran Shamir (1974-1998), a member of the town who was killed while serving in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in Lebanon.



Various historical photos of early life in the town are on display in the museum.



Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever was instrumental, along with Baron Edmond de Rothschild, in establishing Mazkeret Batya in memory of the Baron's mother.

Unfortunately, one of the drawbacks for English-speaking visitors to the museum is that many of the explanatory signs are in Hebrew. With prior coordination, however, it is possible to arrange for a guided tour in English. (Call Daphna at the museum at 972.8.934.9525.) With a rich array of stories, the museum guides relate not only the village's past but also its present.

Across the street from the museum is the site of the original synagogue, razed in 1927 because of structural problems. The new Beit Knesset Hagadol (The Great Synagogue) of Mazkeret Batya is located at the end of Rothschild Street. The synagogue was opened in 1928, a gift of the Rothschild family. The building was designed to capture the flavor of the original synagogue, and has its own special charm. Interestingly, during the end of the British Mandate, in the period leading up to Israel's independence in 1948, members of the Haganah hid weapons under the synagogue's bimah.

A stroll on Rothschild Street leads one in the footsteps of those Jews who, more than a century ago, left their families and their lives in Eastern Europe to follow a 2000-year-old dream of participating in the rebuilding of the Land. Even a brief visit to Mazkeret Batya will give you a glimpse of the past, a taste of the present and a vision of the future. **JA**

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