

# On and Off the Beaten Track in Gush Etzion



By Peter Abelow

**J**ust 12 miles south of Jerusalem is the area known as Gush Etzion, where both ancient and modern history come alive. Located in the heart of what was Biblical Judea, Gush Etzion was liberated 32 years ago in the Six-Day War. Since 1967, the barren rocky hills have been replaced by 14 settlements which today are home to almost 20,000 Israelis. The dramatic story of the area's history is told in a very moving audio-visual presentation at Kibbutz Kfar Etzion. If you have never seen it, make it a "must" on your next trip; if you have seen it before, it is worth watching the recently updated version.

The original four *kibbutzim* of Gush Etzion (the Etzion Bloc) were built in the 1920s, '30s and '40s in the Judean Hills along the ancient *Derech HaAvot* [Pathway of the Patriarchs]. These

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were hills known to our ancestors throughout the *Tanach*.

When the United Nations voted to partition Palestine on Nov. 29, 1947, it was the unfortunate fate of Gush Etzion to be in the section that was allocated to the Arabs. The flourishing *kibbutzim*, isolated from Jerusalem, immediately came under siege. The pioneers, including many who had recently survived the horrors of the Holocaust, became the defenders. Fields and orchards lay unattended as *kibbutz* members were forced to exchange their farming tools for guns. The heroic defense of Gush Etzion ended when the Arabs burst into Kfar Etzion on May 14, 1948 and massacred the remaining fighters.

Only the women and children who had been evacuated a few months earlier survived, many of them vowing to return and rebuild as soon as possible. The area remained under Jordanian occupation until 1967. Shortly after the Six-Day War, some of the survivors, who had remained a tight-knit group through the 19 years, did indeed

return. The reestablishment of Kibbutz Kfar Etzion on its original site was the beginning of the revival of the area known once again as Gush Etzion.

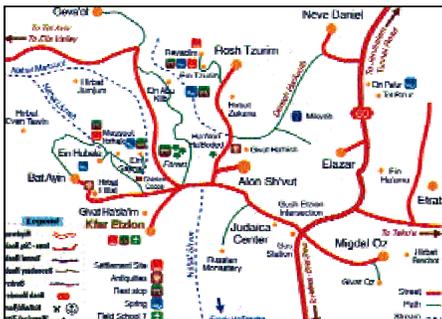
Nearby is the *yishuv* of Alon Shvut, where you should visit the beautiful facilities of Yeshivat Har Etzion, better known as "The Gush." It is known as one of the fine yeshivah programs available for young men of the Diaspora who have completed high school and wish to study in Israel before beginning their college studies. For Israelis, the Gush is one of a network of *hesder yeshivot*, where religious young men commit to a five-year program that incorporates both yeshivah study and service in the Israeli army. On any given day, the *beit hamidrash* is alive with the sounds of hundreds of students from around the world actively engaged in learning Torah.

Just beyond the entrance to Alon Shvut is a dirt road that leads to one of the more dramatic finds in the area. This road brings us to the ancient road that led from Hebron to Jerusalem. Off to one side of it, residents of the area

accidentally discovered a *mikveh* dug into the bedrock. It is believed that this facility was used by *olei regel* [pilgrims] on their way to Jerusalem during the



period of the Second Temple. Most amazing was the discovery of the base of a wall down the middle of the hewn steps leading into the *mikveh*: this separation allowed for the *taborim* [ritually pure people] to exit after their immersion without bumping into the *temeim* [impure people] on their way in — precisely the way the *Mishneh* describes *mikvaot* of the period.



Nearby, the foundation of a home which had stood from the first century BCE through the Bar Kochba revolt (about 135 CE) was identified as Jewish due to the *mikveh* found inside it. It was not uncommon for *mikvaot* to be built in private homes during that era.

**F**rom Kfar Etzion the *yishuv* Bat Ayin is reached by a narrow and winding road; the driver should not be

tempted to look at the spectacular views of the Emek Haelah (Elah Valley) below, where David fought and defeated Goliath. At the turn in the road, just before the Bat Ayin gate, pull into the dirt parking area to explore the ancient ruins there. You will find a fine example of an ancient winepress as well as an adjacent *mikveh*.

Another “must” place to visit in the area is the new Etzion Judaica Center, located just a few meters west of Tzomet HaGush (the Gush Etzion junction) on the main road. Many works of Israel’s finest artists are displayed there, including paintings, silver, ceramic and wood. In addition to the exhibits, Judaica and art can be purchased at the Center.

Efrat is the hub city of Gush Etzion. Its hills — with housing in development on an ongoing basis — are named for the Biblical “seven species.” Although the cornerstone of the first building was laid only 19 years ago, Efrat now boasts a population of 1,300 families, with another 500+ family units currently under construction on the Zayit Hill. There are four schools, a community center and 23 *shuls*. This beautiful Modern Orthodox community, so close to Jerusalem, has attracted a mix of Israelis as well as *olim* from many countries (the U.S., South Africa, England, Australia, France and Russia among them).

Battle-scarred, yet proud of its mighty Jewish heritage, the Gush Etzion section of Israel offers the visitor a variety of experiences with a minimum of travel. To many people, it is the quintessential *Eretz Yisrael* experience: where else on Earth can you visit the past, present and future, all on one spot? **JA**

Opposite page:  
 “Settlers:” *The children of Alon Shvut*  
 This page from top:  
*Etzion Judaica Center, just off Gush Etzion Junction.*  
*A view of the Herodion from Tekoah, just east of the Etzion Bloc.*  
*The settlement of Bat Ayin overlooks the Shefelah.*

*Gush Etzion is a 15-minute drive from the Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo. A new road, with two tunnels and a bridge, bypasses Beit Lechem (which has been turned over to the Palestinian Authority). The road also gives easy access to Betar Illit, a modern community near ancient Betar, which, according to the Mishnah in Ta’anit, is the site of the final devastating defeat of the Bar Kochba rebellion in the second century. If you continue straight past the Betar turnoff, you will soon see the city of Efrat on the left. Tzomet HaGush [Junction] and the right turn towards Kfar Etzion, Alon Shvut and the Judaica Center are just a short distance after the Efrat turnoff. It is advisable to call ahead to reserve a showing of the Kfar Etzion film in English (02-993-5160).*

