

The Gush Etzion Story



Migdal Eder

Modern settlement of the Judean Hills began in 1927 with the founding of

Migdal Eder by a

group of Jews from Jerusalem, many of Yemenite origin. Their intention was to establish a dairy farm and plant orchards, but the village was abandoned and destroyed during the Arab riots of 1929. The same fate befell the early settlement of Kfar Etzion, founded in 1934, when the Arabs rioted in 1936. Even as Europe darkened and communities were annihilated in the Holocaust, settlers moved to Gush Etzion, boldly taking on the harsh weather conditions, rocky soil and hostile Arab neighbors. Kfar Etzion was reestablished in 1943. Trained in Poland as members of the Bnei Akiva Religious Zionist movement, many of the founders were conscious of this his-

toric moment, writing in their Journal:

For us this day marks the end of one period and the beginning of another – a period of conquest and settlement... In Kfar Etzion we shall be opening up a new and exceedingly difficult area for Jewish settlement. We shall have to dedicate all our spiritual and material resources to strike sturdy roots in this area...

By 1945, another farm community, Kibbutz Massuot Yitzchak, had also settled in the region. Two more

Massuot Yitzchak



groups joined the determined effort, one comprised of Israeli Bnei Akiva pioneers and the other of Israeli Hashomer Hatzair youth, founding Kibbutz Ein

Tsurim and Revadim respectively. By the fall of 1947, more than 400 Jewish residents lived on 2,500 acres of the Etzion Bloc. There were ambitious plans for the future.

But in November of 1947, the United Nations Partition Plan put Gush Etzion in Arab territory. Ever hopeful, yet with dark foreboding, the



The children of Kfar Etzion, 1948

kibbutz members began digging trenches and building defense positions. The children and many of the women were evacuated to Jerusalem. A letter from Kfar Etzion dated January 5, 1948, attests to the impact of this move:

The departure of the mothers and children has left an aching void in the village. ...Kfar Etzion, humming with activity, thriving with its stone buildings, its gardens, now has the appearance of a fortified military camp.

A letter from Yoseph Damast of Kfar Etzion to his wife in Jerusalem

describes some of the urgent debate that went on when the Jewish Agency proposed to transfer the married men to another settlement where they could reunite with their families and continue life as civilians:

...And now, my dear, a bit about politics. Discussions regarding our future are taking place this entire week. At the general meeting two basic approaches were expressed. The first favors the acceptance of the proposal. Its supporters claim that we should unite the families wherever possible at a new site where the political and economic future is more promising. The second approach disapproves of the very discussion! Its proponents insist that as long as Kfar Etzion exists we must remain, and under no circumstances are we to consider evacuation...

During the agonizing five months that followed, the outnumbered Gush Etzion defenders held out in the belief that help would come. Yet, on the day of the founding of the State of Israel, the well-equipped forces of the Jordanian Legion directly attacked the *kibbutzim*; battles raged for three days. In the end, 151 Jewish defenders were killed, others taken prisoner, and Gush Etzion fell. Survivors' accounts of the defeat attest to the heroism of the defenders.

The last moments at Kfar Etzion: May 13, 1948

After rebuffing successive attacks the entire morning, the Jewish commander requested a cease-fire. The defenders were assembled in the center of the village to hand over their weapons.

A photographer dressed in European clothes and wearing a white kaffiyeh came on the scene and photographed us... When the photographer had finished, fire was suddenly opened upon us from every direction. Most of the assembled members were hit...

I jumped into a ditch near the school... It was an officer of the Legion who saved me. He solemnly promised that he would do me no harm. When

the battle subsided, the officer took me back to the village and demanded that I show him where the arms caches were. When we passed by the doorway of the shelter... he put a grenade in my hand, pulled out the pin and ordered me to throw it into the shelter. I held the grenade in my hand, for I was prepared to kill myself rather than to obey this order. The officer took it from me and threw it into the shelter himself... (Aliza Feuchtwanger)

Only four Jews survived. Kfar Etzion was looted and burned. The other three villages had no choice but to surrender to the Legion. Several survivors wrote of the experience: ***Massuot Yitzchak: May 14, 1948***

In the early afternoon we were alone, the only settlement remaining in the Etzion Bloc. The settlers of Ein Tsurim and Revadim had been taken off in an unknown direction... Hours passed and the Red Cross delegation had not come... The sun was setting. Shabbat was approaching. One of the members came up and said that Shabbat prayers would be held in the open. It was hard for me to attend a public service... I had not



Etzion Bloc, 1948

reconciled myself to the catastrophe that had overwhelmed us. The verses of the prayers seemed at odds with my pain and sorrow... But it was a religious duty, instilled in me since childhood and, putting aside my hesitation, I joined the congregation... Tears ran down my face and I felt that I was beginning to accept what Fate had decreed. Together with the congregation, I uttered: 'To declare that the Lord is righteous...'

...The previous evening we had decid-

ed to bury the Torah scrolls to prevent their violation. We dug a hole and were about to place the scrolls in it. Suddenly one of the members voiced his strong protest. He claimed that the pit must be enlarged so that the scrolls could be buried in the ark and thereby be preserved. "Some day we will return to this place!" he concluded with great faith... At half past seven that night, two Legion officers arrived with their men... We asked a Legion officer to permit us to take a Torah scroll with us and he consented.

...The men and women are being taken to Chevron, the wounded to Beit Lechem... Tonight we shall no longer be here. So ends the chapter of Gush Etzion.

A particular oak tree, strong and imposing, had been the focal point of community activity when Gush Etzion had bustled with the joys of building and success. "The lone tree," now captive in Arab territory, beckoned to its exiled children from afar. A member of the Revadim community wrote:

For 19 years we looked longingly at Gush Etzion from a distance. Annually, on the date of the birthday of the kibbutz, we would take a trip to the Judean Hills. From the heights of Bar Giora, Abu Gosh or Maale Hachamishah we could see the tree. It symbolized Gush Etzion for us, the place where our kibbutz was initially founded. We would look, relate stories and reminisce...

United by common memory and loss, the children of Gush Etzion remained in contact, meeting at special summer camps and vowing that the day would come when they would return home. When the Six Day War in 1967 restored the region to Jewish hands, they were the first to rush there. Yochanan Ben Yaakov, a returning son, wrote:

I wanted to visit immediately, to be there at Gush Etzion, but the area was still closed by the army. Entrance was restricted to soldiers on duty. I was still a soldier in uniform and my "duty" was – to return home! Permission was granted to proceed.

We passed the familiar sites we had



The “children” return, September 1967

read about – Kever Rachel, Beit Lechem...and then began the steep climb to the beautiful hill country.... We arrived at the entrance of Gush Etzion: the Russian Hill on the left, the “lone tree” on the right and beyond Rocky Hill, Kfar Etzion! Where were

the fruit trees, the homes, the cultural hall?... Nothing remained. Everything had been destroyed.

I stood rooted to the ground. All that I knew about Kfar Etzion was racing through my mind. I had asked to visit, and now found it impossible to leave as

I looked about — and tears of grief mingled with tears of joy.

Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was petitioned to allow the resettlement of Kfar Etzion and after due consideration granted his consent with the blessing, “Children, you may return home.” Preparations were hastily concluded and on September 27, 1967, the grown children of Gush Etzion first visited the graves of their parents and promised to continue their work. Then a line of cars – led by the armored car that had evacuated them in 1948 – made its way through the Judean Hills and back to the site of Kfar Etzion.

It has now been more than 30 years since that day of return, and visitors can readily see that the children of Etzion, joined by many others, continue to restore the Land to its former glory. **JA**

Adapted from “The Etzion Bloc in the Hills of Judea” by Aryeh Routtenberg.



The Lone Tree