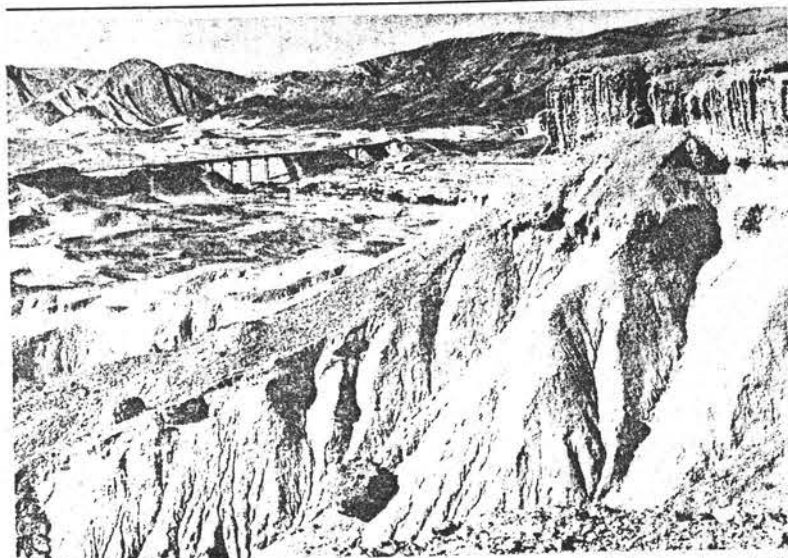


# A dream that failed

The Jerusalem Post's Liora Moriel investigates the failure of Ben-Gurion's plan to settle a million Jews in the Negev



DAVID BEN-GURION had a dream: settling one million Jews in the Negev Desert. Now, 10 years after Ben-Gurion's death — and despite the great technological strides that have been made — the desert is home to only seven per cent of Israel's population. Why did the dream go wrong?

In 1950, Beersheba had only 1,300 inhabitants. A year later, the first development town in Israel, Yeroham, was established 35 kilometres to the south-east. By 1965, when Beersheba's population had grown to 65,200, Yeroham had managed to attract just 6,500 souls, all of them new immigrants and most of them poor and unskilled.

While Beersheba's population has since doubled, Yeroham is fighting hard to keep its 1965 population level.

Other development towns followed Yeroham, but only one — Dimona — managed to become a town in its own right.

For the most part, the industry that was located in these towns relied heavily on government subsidies. It is one such industrialist put it to me: "I am the pressured pioneer *kibbutz halbutz*."

Meanwhile, the settlement of the desert was slow and disappointing. They were isolated from the mainstream of Israeli society by more than distance — they had a different culture, spoke a different language. And they were totally dependent on government largesse.

Before long, the dependence had become an addiction. "They are super-dependent on government institutions," says Leah Shamir-Shunan, who is completing her doctorate on the suitability of industries in non-metropolitan communities. "This is the way they were created and this is the way they are ruled."

**EVEN ARAD**, a planner's paradise that was designed to avoid the mistakes of Yeroham and that boasts the highest per capita income in Israel today, is facing problems on the eve of its third decade.

"I am pessimistic," says Arad Mayor Avraham Shohat, who consistently receives the largest majority of any local government anywhere in the country. He has the people's support, but he knows that he does not have the government's support.

Shohat points out that since 1977, the number of housing units built in the entire Negev region, including Beersheba, has steadily and drastically declined. For 1984, he says, only 250 such units are on the drawing boards.

"The Negev is facing a disaster in terms of population growth. Many settlements will be destroyed. The only solution is to bring sophisticated industry to the area and give it a priority status once again."

The figures bear him out. There has been a steady decline in population in most of the Negev's towns. Apart from Arad, which has managed to attract a fair number of Yamit evacuees, natural growth is more than offset by people leaving for the big cities.

Alignment MK Jacques Amir, until recently the mayor of Dimona, has gone so far as to propose a Negev Law, which would involve massive government intervention. Making the Negev as attractive to investors as Judea and Samaria, it is argued, will result in a boom.

Such a boom was expected in the wake of the IDF's redeployment in the region following the pullback

from Sinai, but it failed to materialize.

**BUT IS THIS realistic?** Is government action the only obstacle to the Negev's development?

At a workshop on "Transfer of Technology" in Tel Aviv this month (which was organized as a part of the sixth world conference of engineers and architects), some of Israel's leading industrialists gave honest and uniform answers to the question: why does industry not set up branches in the Negev?

They pointed out that Israel's developing areas do not have their own markets, and therefore setting up branches in such areas would serve to compete for the same market with the parent company, thus jeopardizing profits.

Also, there is not enough trained personnel in these towns. The highly skilled engineers and the expert technical staff needed for modern enterprises simply do not abound in the peripheral areas. The only solution lies "on the national, social and educational level" — again, government intervention.

Communications constitute a major snag: the roads to the Negev are few and already crowded with slow-moving trucks; there is no public telex system (there is not even a machine in the Beersheba post office, and the sole telex operator in the Beersheba Chamber of Commerce is already overburdened.) The telephone network is not very reliable and getting a telephone installed is no easier than it is anywhere else in the country.

**THE ONLY** body capable of starting the development ball rolling is the government. But there is a regrettable lack of coordination between the government ministries.

Thus, an architect has just won a project sponsored by the Energy Ministry for housing units in Mitzpe Ramon, while hundreds of new flats — many of which are very attractive — are already waiting for buyers.

This is no secret. Haim Kubersky, director of the Interior Ministry and

head of the National Council for Planning and Building, told the conference delegates in Tel Aviv that while there is integrated and highly sophisticated planning in Israel, those who do the planning are not responsible for the implementation, and, as a result, some excellent plans are gathering dust in his drawers.

On closer examination, it turned out that this statement simply followed a long-established tradition of not taking responsibility because, after all, the Interior Ministry is directly responsible for local government and, as such, has the power to carry out those plans it feels must be implemented.

As for the Negev, there seems to be no plan for it at all today. Eli Dayan, mayor of Ashkelon and originally a senior member of Tami, revealed at a symposium in Beersheba last year that "in the past five years, no discussion whatsoever concerning industry in development towns took place in the government."

Shmuel Cohen, mayor of Mitzpe Ramon, added that "Ben-Gurion's vision concerning the future of the Negev has become void."

**BUT NOT** everyone is pessimistic. Scientists working on projects designed to make desert living more attractive feel strongly that the Negev can — and should — have a large population.

Says Prof. Dov Pasternak, an expert in sea-water irrigation at Ben-Gurion University's Boyko Institute of Applied Research: "There is no reason whatsoever why people would not live in the desert." The weather and the solar energy more than compensate for the distance, which, in any case, is small by international standards (it takes three hours to drive from Beersheba to Eilat.)

But while people in Arizona are moving to the desert in search of a better quality of life, it is ironic that Israel, which has pioneered the greening of the desert, should find it

so hard to attract substantial numbers of people to the Negev.

One reason may be the great gulf between what can be done and what, in fact, is being done. Instead of earth-sheltered or adobe houses, Negev towns look like poor, developed towns anywhere, with prefabricated, standard-issue apartment blocks that do not reflect the desert environment.

The public gardens, where they exist at all, are wasteful because they usually rely heavily on irrigation, whereas today there are many plants that are known to be resistant to pollution, dust and drought.

And industry is often in conflict: establishing two towns — Yeroham and Dimona — so close to one another and so close to Beersheba means that they are thrust into competition with each other for trained personnel, fast roads and sophisticated industries.

Stanley Kaplan, a moving force in the recent conference on desert development in Tel Aviv and himself an engineer with a personal commitment to the integration of disciplines in solving such problems, believes that there are essentially three phases of desert development.

The first is simply "conquering nature." The second is the actual greening of the desert, through settlements and agriculture. And the third involves coupling limited resources with high technology.

In this phase, the desert becomes a positive asset.

Prof. Arie Issar, who holds the Pohor Chair in desert hydrology and water resources engineering at the Jacob Blaustein Institute for Desert Research in Sde Boker, echoed the widely held belief that the Negev is Israel's future, with great resources of land and water.

"The Arava," he says, "can be like the Jezreel Valley. The Dead Sea is rich in minerals and Beersheba can be a great industrial centre."

"There is an infrastructure. The only drawback is a lack of vision,

and this is a banal thing to say. Ben-Gurion was a strong leader, and strong leaders attract yes-men. When the leader leaves the scene, these lesser lights take over.

"The pioneering era is over, and now the grey people have taken over. This is natural.

"Even the kibbutzim and moshavim are tired. They are undergoing a value crisis and cannot cope with the challenge. They have not yet become used to the fact that this is not a government dedicated to productive settlements. And instead of pioneering, instead of putting up great experimental farms in areas in need of development, they play the stock market."

According to Issar, the Arava region can become a cattle-growing area as well as the seed-growing area of Israel, and its produce has already replaced some expensive imports. Large farms can be set up there by private enterprise... except for the fact that in Israel, because everything is institutionalized, investors will not be able to get the necessary permits from the Agriculture Ministry. This system also entails a large cadre of researchers who will live and work in the area.

"Scientists push farmers and vice versa, but while once this was a wheel setting a wheel in motion, today it is a wheel obstructing a wheel," he says. The result is that little gets done.

Another impediment is the "metropolitan syndrome" of Israel's electoral system of proportional representation, rather than regional representation. The 6,000 people of the Arava, though spread over a vast area, mean less than the residents of one urban neighbourhood. Lip-service may be paid to the development of the Negev, but the money is spent elsewhere.

**IRONICALLY** the death of Ben-Gurion's dream has created a renaissance for the army in the Negev. In the race between the settlers and the military for "possession" of state lands, the army seems to be winning hands down.

And as Eldad Gissin, director of the southern region for both the Agriculture Ministry and the Jewish Agency, says, once an area has become an artillery range for even a brief time, it is no longer possible to settle it: the debris and dirt are too great.

There is a third "contestant" as well: the Nature Reserves Authority. Already, one million dunams in the Negev have been set aside as nature reserves, and recently, a proposed moshav in the Arava, Shefaz, was scrapped because the authority won a court order to turn it into a nature reserve. Today, a three-sided battle is being waged over Scout Valley (Bikat Sayarim) near the Egyptian border.

Some scientists, like Prof. Joe Gale, director of the Sde Boker Institute, are happy that they have more time to perfect their projects before they are implemented.

The Beduin, too, may have a breathing space after the Tel Malhata evacuation.

So far, there are no more Jewish settlers in the Negev (apart from Beersheba) than Beduin, and the Beduin town of Rahat is as successful as Arad (although it has yet to create a viable industrial zone to provide quality jobs for its population.)

The Negev is there, waiting. It has peace, fresh air and some breathtaking scenery. But with Ben-Gurion gone, who will lead the Children of Israel into the desert once again?

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