

# Sequel to a trauma

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ALMOST THREE years ago the evacuation of the Yamit area in northern Sinai was completed amid scenes of chaos and heartbreak.

Whatever their views about the wisdom of withdrawing in return for peace with Egypt, there were very few settlers in the area, either in the moshavim and kibbutzim, or in Yamit itself, who were not embittered by the gross incompetence of the operation.

Not surprisingly, most of them took whatever compensation they could wrest from the government and shook the sand of Yamit from their feet forever. Many returned to the towns and villages from which they had migrated six years earlier; others sought new locations in all parts of the country; quite a few left Israel altogether.

A minority of the more obstinate resolved to remain nearby, across the Sinai border in the western Negev, which was symbolically named Pit'hat Shalom, a doorway to peace. Today, Pit'hat Shalom consists of two kibbutzim, six moshavim and a Nahal outpost, and most of its settlers are struggling to make ends meet.

Jewish Agency settlement department chief Nissim Zvili notes that there is a blueprint for a hundred new settlements in the area and advanced planning for 16, but there is no question of building any new villages until the existing ones are soundly established.

The moshavim are deeply in debt and his department is currently working out a scheme in conjunction with the Agriculture Ministry to convert their short-term, high-interest debts into long-term loans. If this is achieved, Zvili is confident that the settlements can develop a viable economic existence for themselves with a combination of greenhouses, orchards and field crops.

There are a number of objective reasons for the difficult situation of the Pit'hat Shalom settlements today, as compared with the prosperity of the Yamit area villages in the late 1970s. The Sinai settlements made most of their money by growing winter vegetables for export and for the domestic market. Now, both

these markets are more or less saturated, with the Jordan Rift and the Arava also competing for them. In addition, because of the strength of the dollar, the European market is less profitable than it was.

There is also a crucial two-three degree temperature difference between the Sinai and Negev settlements, necessitating more investment in greenhouses in the latter.

Zvili admits that his department made a mistake in relying too much on hot-house tomatoes for export in the new region. They are now being heavily subsidized, and alternative crops are being sought. But he maintains that part of the problem was caused by the tardiness of the Agriculture Ministry in providing the loans and credits for the initial investments in equipment.

Agriculture Ministry Director-General Meir Ben-Meir is not prepared to comment specifically on Pit'hat Shalom. He notes that the country is facing economic problems in all directions and has to decide on its priorities.

However, the main problem, nation-wide, is that ecological research never precedes settlement but always takes place simultaneously with it, making the settlers part of the inevitable process of trial and error. He admits that government bureaucracy takes time to process loans and that this does cause problems in a time of galloping inflation.

Eliezer Ben-Zvi of Kibbutz Magen, head of the Eshkol Regional

Council, says that the government has to understand that settlement costs money. "If they want people to live along the border with Egypt, they have to pay for it. There are no short cuts."

Ben-Zvi is convinced that his region can be "the vegetable garden of Europe," but there has to be heavy initial investment. The settlements of Pit'hat Shalom are suffering from the general problems of Israeli agriculture; but they are suffering more, because they are new.

His deputy, Yosef Blaier of Moshav Yesha, spells it out: the farmers must have their prices guaranteed, otherwise they get into a vicious circle of debts and interest.

## Daniel Gavron

There should be a reasonable exchange-rate insurance for exporters, and subsidies cannot be avoided.

"After all, even American farmers are subsidized," he points out. The settlements, most of them with only 30 families at present, have to grow, or they will not survive.

UNDOUBTEDLY, the most successful Sinai evacuees are the two kibbutzim of Sufa and Holit, which simply moved across the border, lock, stock and barrel. They moved everything - even the houses - although in the end it proved more efficient to build new homes, and the prefabricated components of the former settlements are piled up between the two kibbutzim.

The kibbutz structure, and the assistance and support they had from the United Kibbutz Movement, made the transfer relatively painless. "It was still an emotional trauma," says Gadi, the secretary of Holit. "Let's hope the people of Israel does not have to go through it again."

Holit was founded as a Nahal outpost in 1977, and became a kibbutz the following year. Gadi joined in 1979, when it was already clear that the settlement would be moved. A 27-year-old sabra, the slim, bearded Gadi has the typical laconic self-confidence of the young kibbutznik.

The 55-member kibbutz is economically viable, he says, growing vegetables and cotton, partly for export. It transferred its two-year-old mango orchard from Sinai and hopes to produce fruit next year. It

has converted its hot-houses, originally for tomatoes, for turkey raising and growing pineapples.

The turkeys had just gone to market, leaving only their feathers, water-troughs and food-bins behind; but we were able to see the pineapples growing in their spiky shrubs and were each given a tasty fruit to take home. The kibbutz already looks well developed, with a swimming pool, lawns, trees, shrubs and flower-beds.

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Later, relaxing over a good lunch in the communal dining hall, Gadi tells us that the only thing holding up growth is housing. Sixteen units are currently under construction, and the village continues to receive Nahal settlement grants.

EIN HABESOR, referred to jokingly as "the Savyon of the Negev," is an interesting innovation: a private moshav. Outside the borders of Pit'hat Shalom, it is also outside all the normal settlement frameworks. Populated by former settlers of Sadot, Netiv Ha'asara, Dikla, Haruvit and Neviot (Nueba), it has been constructed entirely by its members. Rather than transfer their former farms and homes, they took financial compensation and used it to create an independent village, not linked to a settlement movement, nor assisted by the government or the Jewish Agency.

The houses are large and well-appointed, set among lawns and shrubs. The ambience really is that of Savyon or Herzliya Pituah.

Every member put up \$50,000 for the infrastructure, which includes roads, paths, electricity, water, phones, offices, public buildings, a tennis court, a basketball pitch and a swimming pool. They built their own houses, purchased their own equipment and even planted their orchards at their own expense. There is no mutual insurance scheme, and each member markets his produce as he sees fit.

"We didn't want to have anything to do with any official body," explains Danny Shehori. "We wanted to be free to build our village in our own way and to leave individual members to manage their own affairs."

This does not mean, he hastens to add, that there should be a free-for-all. He is in favour of strict supervision as regards quotas, and is convinced that, if production is properly planned, everyone can earn a decent living.

We found Danny and his wife Hava pulling weeds in the garden in front of their uncompleted house. They decided to invest in the farm first and their home later. "I thought the farm might build me a house, but the house would never produce me a farm," he explains.

Today, the couple work their dunam of greenhouse tomatoes, dunam of export flowers, five dunams of open-air tomatoes, five dunams of melons and 10 dunams of mangoes with the help of one volunteer (a Norwegian girl) and one

hired hand from Rafah. They lost money last year, going some IS4m. into debt, but have more or less covered that.

Danny has an income from his taxi, which he shares with a neighbour. Their main job is taking teachers to and from the regional schools. He bought the taxi because he saw that he would not be able to make a living from farming in the early years.

Many other members are in a worse financial position. The surface affluence is deceptive; it represents a very big personal investment. The

members understood that they were forgoing the normal assistance by opting for independence; but they were surprised that they did not receive the usual allocation given to everyone planting approved orchards when they planted their mangoes.

HAVA IS from Arad, Danny from Haifa, and the couple lived in Arad from 1973 to 1976, when they went to Dikla, one of the successful northern Sinai moshavim. He had adapted his methods of farming to the new location, the differences of soil and climate, but it has not been a basic change. "We will earn a living here, but we earned more there," he smiles.

In the comfortable living-room of the adapted store-room that serves as their temporary home - it even has wallpaper - Hava talks about the evacuation of three years ago.

"We received a piece of desert and made it bloom," she says. "It was hard moving out. Many didn't want to. But I thought, if there is a chance for peace, why not?"

Today she feels bitter. True, the State of Israel made the big sacrifice, but she did her personal bit, and she is disappointed by the results. It is the small things that hurt, like the current Egyptian attitude over Taba.

"What do they need it for?" she demands. "We gave them so much; why do they have to make such a fuss over a few hundred metres?"

Hava and Danny have no regrets about becoming farmers, despite the hardships. "It's not like a job with set hours," says Hava. "You are always at it." Yesterday, Shabbat, they had been sorting flowers from dawn till dusk. She smiles suddenly, as if she feels she has been too solemn. "It will be okay," she concludes.

LIKE MOST of Pit'hat Shalom, Moshav Dekel is producing and losing. "We get fantastic yields: tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, flowers,

grapes," declaims a member who prefers to remain anonymous. "But every month we are deeper in debt."

He brushes aside the usual explanations, convinced that the entire problem is caused by the high interest rates charged for credit by Ihud Hakla'i, the settlement's moshav movement. He does not accept that there are special problems in Pit'hat Shalom. In his view, it is the problem of the moshav movement all over Israel.

Certainly one explanation given by both Nissim Zvili and the regional council - the small size of the Pit'hat Shalom villages - does not apply to Dekel, which has 49 families.

Dekel is yet another category of Sinai evacuees. Settlers from the town of Yamit, who wanted to establish a moshav, they built their own houses with their compensation; but their farms are financed by the Jewish Agency's settlement department.

Oded and Ita have seven children, ranging in age from two to 22. Ita looks remarkably youthful. Oded's face is deeply lined; his smile is ironic. Like most of the families at Dekel, they have not profited from

their farming, but have been living off their savings, and from Oded's outside work. Last year was a particularly bad one, but this year they are already starting to repay some of their debts.

"If you had asked me six months ago if I would like to leave, I wouldn't have answered you," smiles Ita. "Today I feel much happier."

She retains bitter memories of the evacuation. The government bungled it, she feels. It would have been better to announce from the start that there was no compensation rather than drag out the whole thing. "The government made us into blackmailers," adds her husband.

On the peace treaty with Egypt, she is categorical. "It wasn't worth it. If I could put the clock back, I would do it today."

She is resentful, too, about the government's neglect of Pit'hat Shalom. She does not see why the Katif area in Gaza and the West Bank should get preference. The Pit'hat Shalom settlements are no less important from a security point of view.

Possibly the most eloquent comment of the whole day was made by Oded. "I am tired," he confessed.

TALMEI YOSEF was moved in the same way as the kibbutzim, except that half of the 30 families decided to take financial compensation and go



elsewhere. Denise and Peter Sanders were among those who joined the evacuees at the new Talmei Yosef, arriving in June 1982.

Denise is a biochemist, who has just lost her job at the Chemada factory in nearby Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak. Peter was a lawyer in South

Africa. Except for the debts, he is enjoying his new life and is confident he can make a go of it. His daughter, Carly, is only three, but he already feels that the moshav is a great place to raise children.

"My debt last November was IS13.5 million, which is about average," he says. "I hope it was because of the tardiness of the Jewish Agency and the government in forwarding money for the farm." He invested his own money and entered the vicious circle of accumulating interest, but is certain that the current Agency operation to consolidate their debts will take them out of the rut.

Peter farms five dunams of hot-houses, including tomatoes, peppers, beans and flowers. He also has five dunams of open-air tomatoes and three under plastic tunnels, as well as five dunams of mangoes and five of grapes. He employs three workers from Rafah, whom he pays IS120,000 a month "and a box of tomatoes very week."

Talmei Yosef has 32 families and wants to absorb another six. They have advertised in *The Jerusalem Post* and had a number of applicants. If the moshav grows it should take off, he believes.

It is clear that, in the current financial situation, the successors of the northern Sinai settlers are not going to get large-scale assistance. For the time being there can be no increase in the number of settlements in Pit'hat Shalom. But one thing seems self-evident: before six more settlements are established in Judea and Samaria, the nine settlements of Pit'hat Shalom should be brought to full size and economic stability. □

## WALL STREET JOURNAL FEB 20 1985

### Israeli Inflation Rises

TEL AVIV, Israel—Israel's inflation, restrained by government wage and price controls, rose 5.3% in January, quickening from December's 3.7% increase, the government said.

## JOURNAL OF COMMERCE FEB 22 1985 Doubling of Exports Forecast in Israel

JERUSALEM — Israeli exports will double by 1989, erasing the nation's non-military trade deficit, Economic Planning Minister Gad Yaacobi predicted Thursday.

"On the basis of the existing plan, we estimate that by 1989 industrial exports will double and reach over \$10 billion, which will do away with the non-military trade deficit," Mr. Yaacobi said.

In 1984, Israel's total exports carried a value of \$10 billion, Mr. Yaacobi said.

## JOURNAL OF COMMERCE FEB 20 1985

### Israel Enters 2nd Austerity Phase

Israel launched Phase 2 of its austerity program this week as new measures went into effect Feb. 18.

They include sharp reductions in government subsidies for basic foodstuffs and public transportation, according to Uri Oren, Israeli press consul and economic spokesman in New York.

The Israeli government has doubled its travel tax from \$100 to \$200 per person in order to save Israel's foreign currency reserves, Mr. Oren explained.