

ISRAEL

ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS IN JORDAN VALLEY SETTLEMENTS

Tel Aviv HA'ARETZ in Hebrew 11 Apr 85 Supplement pp 12-13

[Article by Dor Oren: "In the Jordan Depression"]

[Text] Avi Cohen came to the Jordan Valley 10 years ago. At the time he belonged to a NAHAL [Military Pioneering Youth] group that was sent to the kibbutz Yitib [acronym for Yitzhaq Tabankin] before their military service. After the service, Avi returned to Yitib and decided to make his home there. He spent 3 years in the kibbutz that bore the name of Yitzhaq Tabankin, one of the leaders of the Kibbutz Movement. "That was the best time of my life," says Avi. After the Kibbutz Movement decided to dismantle the settlement, Avi remained there by himself. He had difficulty leaving the place that he describes as "the most beautiful I ever saw in my life." For 1 month he took care of it by himself, then finally closed the gates and left. "That was the saddest day in my life," he adds. "The only consolation is that I met my wife there." Today, this tall and strongly built man is employed by Moshav Meshua as orchard organizer. In a few months the moshav board will decide on his application to join the moshav as a regular member.

"Believe me," he says, as we stroll among the fruit trees of Moshav Meshua, "my fondest dream is to return one day to Yitib. I have wonderful memories of it. Even today, whenever I am in the neighborhood of Yitib, my heart beats faster. Sad. Very sad that it had to end this way. But you know what?" he adds with an ironical smile, "perhaps there is nevertheless something positive about what happened there. It should serve to remind people living in the area of what can befall them tomorrow. And believe me, those are not idle words. They do not like to hear this in the Valley, but the situation of many of the settlements is not far removed from that of Yitib. That is the reality, old man.

Kibbutz Yitib undoubtedly serves as a warning signal to the other 16 settlements in the Jordan Valley. The kibbutz was started in 1970 as a NAHAL settlement. It was given civilian status 6 years later, and Kibbutz Giv'at Hayyim became its sponsor, as is customary in the Kibbutz Movement.

Tabankin Turning in His Grave

There is controversy about the causes that brought about the dismantling of the kibbutz. Some claim that political considerations within the

Kibbutz Movement were responsible for it. Others believe that it was the human material that formed the kibbutz. Whatever the reason, 4 years after becoming a civilian settlement, kibbutz Yitib closed its gates. "I have no doubt," says Motke Keshet, one of the members of Giv'at Brenner, "that had Yitzhaq Tabankin still been alive, he would not have like it. This is a resounding defeat for the Kibbutz Movement. A pamphlet was recently published under the title 'Yitib Will Not Fall a Second Time.' In July of this year we hope to bring people here."

Motke Keshet is the social coordinator of the "Bonim" group that has been in the area for the past few weeks. He believes that this time things will be different. "Any settlement bearing the name of Yitzhaq Tabankin must succeed. The name is too important for the enterprise to be allowed to fail again."

Controversies about past difficulties and question marks about the future are not the lot of kibbutz Yitib alone. They are characteristic of all the valley settlements, including the township of Ma'ale Efra'im, and become exacerbated when one considers what goes on east and west of the area, and when one tries to draw comparisons. And that is when frustration takes hold.

In the west blossom the settlements of Judaea and Samaria. Some 45 percent of the settlement budget have been poured into that area in the past years, and the results are easily perceived. The Jordan Valley people closely follow the rapid construction and massive development work carried out by their neighbors in the west. Heartbreaking. "Envy? Not necessarily," says Miri Adar, in charge of development at Ma'ale Efra'im. "But definitely frustration at the discrimination."

And in the east, on the other side of the river, there are the agricultural projects of the Jordanian government. In the past 10 years, the Jordanian government poured millions of dollars (and foreign experts) into agricultural development. Even without binoculars one can see the plastic sheets and sprinklers (made in Israel, but with the manufacturer's name scratched out) on the other side of the river. In the valley it is said that things are coming along nicely across the border.

The anxiety mounts when they consider what is happening on the Israeli side of the Jordan Tidewater. The plan had been to prepare some 30,000 dunams along the Jordan for cultivation. The IDF, the Jewish National Fund, and NAHAL settlements carried out the work (thicket and mine clearing) with a view to supplying additional land for the valley settlements. But the big project hit a snag. Only 12,000 dunams have been cleared so far, and only 4,000 are actually being cultivated at present (recently, kibbutz Galgal abandoned the land allocated to it in the area!) "Looking! Of course I am looking," says Avraham (Kopo) Kopolovicz from moshav Mehula. "Just look what is going on on the other side and look at the situation here. Soon the desert vegetation will again cover up everything. And there everything is blooming!"

## Only 4,500 Souls

Frustration at the failure of the Jordan Tidewater project reflects the general disappointment with the situation in the valley. Since the establishment of the first settlement in the valley over 10 years ago, only 950 families (some 4,000 people) came here. Some 750 families live in the agricultural settlements, and another 250 families in what was to become the township of Ma'ale Efraim. In the past years most of the farms (especially those on the mountain top) suffered heavy losses because of crop failures. Currently the debt of the valley settlements totals \$15 million. Members of some of the moshavs prefer to give up farming and seek their luck in other jobs. About 1 year ago 20 families left the moshav Netiv Hagdud. There and in the moshav Ro'i the Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency had to appoint special boards to manage the farms, after local ones failed in the attempt.

People in the Jordan Valley prefer to talk about the mistakes made here in the past and about the helplessness of the government. Yisra'el Nedivi, who has been the chairman of the local council for the past 5 years, speaks about the difficult climate, water shortage, crops which were not suitable for the area, faulty planning, and many other difficulties. But that is only half the truth. The other half I find out in the other settlements, those that did succeed to adapt and that are almost independent economically (the development budget of each settlement is about \$250,000 a year). Such settlements are Pezel, Tomer, Meshua, and Mehula. Yehuda Reiness, the secretary of the moshav Mehula, says: "There are no miracles in farming settlements, and there is no secret for success. The one and only reason that moshav Mehula manages to exist without debts or crisis is quite simple: We do not try to live beyond our means. We never relied--as do other settlements in the area--on government promises. Our development has been gradual. We did not allow our members to run ahead unchecked. That is our secret."

Avraham (Kopo) Kopolovicz, also from moshav Mehula, adds: "When it comes to agriculture in Israel, there is a view that if you succeed, it is very well, but if you fail, it is not so terrible. Once every few years the government cancels debts and everything falls into place again. When the government does not cancel debts, the settlements get into trouble. That is precisely what happened in the valley. Even more absurd is the fact that people live here within two separate financial systems, one private and one collective. Under the second they lose money without a care, while under the first they live prosperously and even wastefully."

## Weak Leadership

There is an additional reason for this unfortunate situation, and that is lack of proper local leadership and indifference on the part of the inhabitants. As opposed to the settlements of Judaea, Samaria, and the Golan Heights, the Jordan Valley has failed to produce a serious leadership, capable of propelling the area forward. "We do not have here leaders like Hanan Porat or Rabbi Levinger," people say in the valley. "Recently, we

tried to find in the local council a farming manager, which is a very important position. No one was prepared to take it upon himself; those who were were not suited for it, while those who could have done the job declined. Each farmer in the area is concerned only with the success of his fields, and there is no one to take the whole area in hand and propel it forward."

No less than six settlement bodies are active in the valley: the Kibbutz Movement, the Moshav Movement, the Farmers Union, the Herut-Betar Movement, the Zionist Worker Movement, and the Religious Worker Movement. Although no tension or clash of interests is felt in the area, it is understood that each movement prefers to take care only of the settlements connected to it and to ignore the needs of the area as a whole.

"There is no doubt that I, too, am responsible for the failure of the area," says Yisra'el Nedivi, head of the local council. "However, far more responsible for this sad situation are the settlement bodies, the government, and of course, the difficult situation in which agriculture has been in recent years in Israel and throughout the world."

No one is oblivious of those facts. The Jordan Valley, which was to have competed with Ha'arava for the title of "greenhouse of Israeli agriculture," produces and exports vegetables (such as bell peppers, cabbage, eggplants, squash, etc.), grapes, dates and flowers. In recent years special emphasis was put on research and development, and one of the great achievements is the "Goldie" strain of yellow squash that has become very popular in European markets. Why were such things not considered earlier? Why was it necessary to wait for the 1980's in order to think and plan? "We did not notice that the situation was deteriorating in the past 2 years," says Miahah Pitro. "People were absorbed in their work and followed instructions from above in everything concerning farming. Farming is not a safe bet. And do not forget that in recent years, following the open bridges policy, Jordanian product has been a serious competitor."

#### No Investors

The settlement department of the Histadrut does not see settlement in the Jordan Valley as a failure. People there believe that the logical solution to the difficulties is "a change of concept concerning settlement," as spokesman Ze'ev Ben-Yosef put it. That is to say, it does not necessarily have to be farming settlements. This concept is supported by community leaders in the valley, and fits in with the Poliaris report compiled under the late Agriculture Minister Simcha Erlich with a view to planning the recovery of the Jordan Valley settlement. Among other things, the report envisages the development of tourism in the area.

Miahah Pitro explains: "Some 150,000 pilgrims travel every year on the road between Jerusalem and Tiberias. There are enough tourist attractions in the area to interest the pilgrims: the baptismal site Qezer al-Yahad, the Herodot Palace, the Quarnatal Monastery, the ancient Synagogue of Na'aran, and so forth. Safari trips can be organized for tourists in the Ga'on Hayarden, or trips to the hot springs of al-Maliah. The area has a tourist potential that should be developed."

Industrial potential should also be developed, say the people in the valley. Plants and developers should be drawn into the area. But reality is quick to shake up the dreamers. In the industrial area of Ma'ale Efra'im one is met by a deserted area of new buildings stretching over 5,000 dunams. "What is there here to attract developers?" asks Miri Adar in frustration. "Common sense dictates that investors and plants should go for the special conditions offered them in Judaea and Samaria, which are geographically even closer to the center of the country. There is goodwill, there is room, and there is readiness, but there are no investors. This is the situation."

The steerers of the Israeli economy are aware of the dismal situation of the settlements in the Jordan Valley. This year it was decided to increase the budget allocation for the development of the area as compared to the development allocations for Judaea and Samaria. The Knesset Financial Commission has already met several times to discuss the difficulties in the area, but no practical decision has yet been made.

Community leaders in the valley have come to a sad conclusion: The assumption that there is national consensus on everything concerning settlement in the Jordan Valley is not necessarily true. This is also the reason for the cooperation--after long years of watching from the side--with the Judaea and Samaria council. Aya Batzar of the Tehiya Movement, who represents the Moshav Movement in the area, welcomes this trend. "We are an integral part of the entire area, and their fate is our fate. For that reason we must support them in all their struggles, otherwise we will continue to lag behind, as is currently the case."

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