

## **Beit Eshel – Agriculture and water in the desert An accessible text in English**

Welcome to the Negev, an enormous desert, wild and desolate, lacking water and with little vegetation.

Despite these challenges, the leadership of the Jewish people in Eretz Israel understood that the Negev must be part of the future State of Israel.

Keren Kayemet LeIsrael understood how important it was to have Jewish presence in the Negev. Following the restrictions placed by the British authorities, it decided to first build agricultural research stations there. The pretext was to assess whether establishing communities in the Negev was even a viable option.

The most important element for sustaining life is water. Immediately after the decision was made to try settling in the Negev, the KKL-JNF began to drill to hopefully find sources of water. Five times the drill brought up only dust and sand, but on the 6<sup>th</sup> attempt, water was found at a depth of 70 meters.

### **Miriam Breiner describes the scene:**

**They were drilling to find water and they called out to us. Suddenly out of the pipe came water. I will never forget it – water flowing out of the desert sands.**

The decision was made right then and there: Here a settlement would be built.

While preparations were made to start pumping, most of the water supply was brought in barrels from Beer Sheva. And so, the pioneers of Beit Eshel had to live under strict water-saving discipline. Every drop of water was collected for recycling and even drainage from the shower was used to irrigate the vegetable garden.

### **Rivka Grozovinski explains:**

**We did not waste even one drop of water. With the scarce vegetation that existed, every drop of water was precious.**

Even when the water pump began working, it often failed and the amount of available water was minimal. Nevertheless, drilling provided a basic water supply for the needs of the settlers, the farm animals and the 5 dunams, about 1 acre, of vegetable garden.

In the early days of settlement, the settlers' work concentrated on what was termed "political plowing". This was a political statement in order to show ownership over the land. A huge area of 30,000 dunams, more than 7,000 acres, was plowed and cultivated to lay the foundations for future settlements.

The members mainly conducted agricultural research and led experiments in a wide range of subjects – soil, water, climate, growing trees that shed leaves annually and forest trees. Because of the severe lack of water in the desert, much of their effort was invested in finding ways to collect and use drainage water. Groundwork done in the fields helped to divert surface runoff from rainfall directly into the orchards. Thanks to this action, orchards here saw as much water as orchards growing in regions with more rainfall.

Look around you, and you can see some of the trees that were planted back then and are still alive today. Among them there are 3 large and impressive tamarisk trees planted on one side of the courtyard.

With determination and enthusiasm, the members of Beit Eshel planted a variety of fruit trees such as carobs, almonds, pomegranates and pears. They also planted forest trees designated for desert climate, such as tamarisks, eucalyptus, and acacia.

One of the ground-breaking experiments conducted at Beit Eshel focused on growing vegetables without soil. This process, called hydroponic farming, was at that time a completely new and revolutionary idea.

### **Yehuda Gil tells this story:**

**Professor Suskin came here and laid out rows of containers that were held up above ground on poles. He made a kind of dough out of sawdust and then planted the vegetables inside the containers. And they grew like crazy!! In fact this was the first hydroponic farming in the country.**

Remarkably, the success of raising field crops such as wheat and barley on only limited rainfall filled the members of Beit Eshel with pride. In 1946,

despite the small amount of rainfall, crop production in Beit Eshel was similar to the harvests in regions with greater rainfall.

Still, the members of Beit Eshel could not depend solely on agriculture. As the settlement grew and developed, so did the spirit of innovation: the members were motivated to find more sources of income.

A large bulldozer owned by the settlement provided earthwork services. Two flatbed trucks and a pickup offered transportation services around the Negev and to the centre of the country. A team of builders was involved in various construction projects in the region. A garage provided service foreign cars. In the settlement itself, the chicken coop, the dairy farm, the bakery and the vegetable garden met the daily needs of the members as well as local customers.

There was even the first sign of industry when a factory of metal works for chicken coops began here.

There was nothing more important in Beit Eshel than the value of work. In times when there was no fieldwork or other tasks, members were sent to pick fruit in the orchards of Nes Ziona.

With such diligence, no wonder that after only four years Beit Eshel had become a green oasis at the heart of the desert.

The economic strength of the settlement was one of the reasons it was able to survive the devastation of war despite the lack of food and supplies.

You are invited to continue to more audio stations and listen to the rest of the story of Beit Eshel.