

Beit Eshel – The Courtyard An accessible text in English

Shalom, you are in the central courtyard of Beit Eshel, nicknamed The Castle. The layout of the yard is similar to those of Revivim and Gvulot – other settlements in the Negev. Other settlements in the Galilee, namely Hukook, Biryat and Ramot Naftali, were also built according to this plan.

As you look around, notice that the courtyard is surrounded by a wall. Within the walled area, you see an arch-roofed building with 5 rooms. These rooms included a kitchen, a dining room, a living room and a private room for the employees of the Jewish National Fund.

The private room served as the base for Aminadav Altchuler, who was appointed by the JNF to deal with the purchase of land and maintain good relations with the local Bedouin and Arabs.

Looking up you can see the two-story security tower that was used for both storage for weapons and also as a police station. The members of Beit Eshel served as the policemen for the area.

The original plan of Beit Eshel was to establish an agriculture research station, but members of the HaYogev organization who settled here had other dreams. They wanted to create a real community, a type of agricultural cooperative called a moshav. In no time, more men and women joined the group. The arrival of women brought meaningful improvement to the atmosphere of the place and transformed it from an isolated, windy and sun-baked camp into an actual community. Beit Eshel grew steadily and only 4 years after it was founded, there were already more than 100 members living here.

With the steady growth of population, came the urgent need for more places to live. The settlers ingeniously built mud shacks alongside the tents.

Close your eyes and try to imagine how this courtyard looked in 1946, brimming with idealistic young settlers and full of life.

Can you smell the sweet aroma of baking bread? Can you hear the crowing of the roosters and the cackling of the chickens? A bakery built in the yard provided fresh bread daily and even cakes and porridge. You can see nearby the chimney of the oven.

Ruth Yosovzon, a member of Beit Eshel tells her story:

(Recording) **We would make, corn flour porridge with cocoa powder for the members in huge pots of 100 liters of water. Whoever passed by our community and heard that in Beit Eshel you could get this chocolate delicacy dropped by to eat some.**

The dairy and the chicken coup provided milk and eggs. The 5 dunams or 1 acre of vegetable gardens provided fresh, clean and tasty vegetables. This specific garden was partially irrigated by drainage water from the showers.

All around the Negev they knew that in Beit Eshel, the members eat well!

The shower, whose concrete floor can still be seen in the eastern corner of the yard, was an important element of life here. A barrel of cold water stood on a high tripod, pouring down water for a refreshing shower after a hard day of work. But what about dirty clothes? Now that was quite a frustrating issue.

Rivka Grozovinsky explains:

We had a common clothes storeroom. We washed all the clothes by hand and then hung them to dry near the fence. Every day at 11 o'clock a wind storm would come and all the clean laundry turned yellow with sand. It was something awful.

In 1946, three years after the establishment of Beit Eshel, a doctor joined the community. They built a one-room lodging and a clinic for him, which you can see at the western corner of the yard. With a doctor present, mothers and children could also join the group. Beit Eshel was the first Jewish community in the Negev where children lived. Their presence was a source of pride and it brought much recognition to the place.

Even at the heart of the desert you cannot live without some culture. The members of Beit Eshel enjoyed traveling around to different sites in the region. They conducted unique and festive Shabbat services, holidays and ceremonies. They even had their own choir. Most of the cultural activities were produced by the members, but there was also once a performance by musicians from the British Police Orchestra and once by the Palestine Symphony Orchestra. That certainly sparked a strong emotional reaction from the audience. Once there was even a visit from the British, who drove in with a pickup truck and a generator to screen a Mickey Mouse movie for the children of Beit Eshel.

But not every story has a happy end.

Tension between the people of Beit Eshel and their Arab neighbors grew after the UN to divide the country into 2 states. During the War of Independence, the place was heavily bombarded, the courtyard was demolished and the prosperous community was completely destroyed.

החטיבה לחינוך ולקהילה, המחלקה הפדגוגית

A detailed description about what happened here during the war can be heard at the audio station called "Days of War and Courage".

After the war, the settlement was not rebuilt and remained in ruins. In 1985, the site was declared as a National Heritage site, part of the Beer Sheva Stream Park. The Jewish National Fund restored the buildings, gave new life to the site and opened it to the public. Now, everyone can get to know the unique story of Beit Eshel.

We invite you to move on to the next audio stations and listen to the complete story of the site.