

Beit Eshel – The War An accessible text in English

Four quiet years passed in Beit Eshel, years that were dedicated with love and enthusiasm to the development of a flourishing community at the heart of the desert.

But step by step the winds of war began to blow stronger. The discussions of a possible partition plan in the United Nations increased the tension between Jews and Arabs. Stone-throwing at passing vehicles and shootings at the settlement by local Arabs became a daily routine.

The first victim was Aharon Muchtar who was murdered by Arabs as he riding in a bus from Gaza to Beer Sheva. This was a clear sign that the situation had reached a point of no return.

When the UN resolution passed on November 29th 1947, dividing the land between the Arabs and the Jews, it was not celebrated here with dancing, but rather with deep concern.

Beit Eshel began preparations for the coming war. A platoon of Palmach fighters, the elite unit of the pre-State Hagana army, was sent as reinforcement to the settlement. They received the responsibility for the security of the community. Together with its members, they began the work of fortifying it.

The road to the north was blockaded by the local Arabs. That made passage through Beer Sheva impossible. The commander of the British police in Beer Sheva tried to convince the settlers to evacuate, but they refused. Only when bullets penetrated the walls of the children's house, was the decision made to evacuate mothers and children with the assistance of the British army. From a civilian settlement, Beit Eshel became a frontline military outpost.

Because of the deteriorating security situation, representatives of Beit Eshel asked for a meeting with Yigal Alon, the commander of the Palmach. And indeed, they met in January 1948.

Ze'ev Grozovisky remembers the meeting:

Yigal Alon told us: We have no intention of evacuating the community. We have both a military and political interest in the continued existence of Beit Eshel. But we have no way to help you. If you survive, good for you; if you do not survive, may God help you.

Immediately after the State of Israel was declared, the Egyptian army invaded the country. Some of their forces stopped in Beer Sheva. The place served as launch pad for the Egyptians for a heavy bombardment and an infantry attack on Beit Eshel. At some point the attack suddenly stopped and the Egyptian force retreated.

Na'im Givoni describes the scene:

Suddenly the shooting stopped and then everyone started running. But where to? We did not know. Running wildly, I dove into the bomb shelter and then I saw the panic. The whole population of Beit Eshel was packed like sardines inside the shelter.

The damage from the bombardment was horrible. The commander of the region Moishale Albert Itzhar was killed, most of the buildings were completely destroyed and most of the farm animals lay dying. Everything that had been built over the past 5 years with such enormous effort had been completely demolished in just a few hours.

Nevertheless, the defenders of Beit Eshel were not defeated. Immediately after the bombardment they began rebuilding the fortifications, but this time with much more durability. The fortifications included deep trenches, well-armed outposts, a large bomb shelter, a defense barrier surrounding the place, and a bunker for command and communication. The remains of those fortifications can still be seen in the southern part of the yard.

The fortifications were completed with hard, round-the-clock work, and under fire. For 5 months Bet Eshel was under continuous attack – with 10 to 100 shells falling each day! The security tower was blown up by the defenders after they realized it was an aiming point for the Egyptian artillery. Life in Beit Eshel moved to a depth of 2-3 meters below ground level in order to continue functioning under fire.

For a long period, the place was under complete siege. Food gradually ran out, supply convoys stopped arriving and the defenders were on the verge of hunger. They were reduced to eating the meat of the farm animals that were killed in the bombings. Sometimes they were able to add to the menu meat from an unlucky camel that had wandered into the settlement.

Ze'ev Grozovisky tells of the feeling at the time:

The feeling of uncertainty followed us continuously throughout the 5 long months of the Egyptian siege. We never knew when the next attack would come that would mean the end of us.

On October 21st 1948 the IDF occupied Beer Sheva in Operation Moshe. Which was named after the commander of Beit Eshel, Moishale Itzhar of blessed memory.

Beit Eshel survived. The new fortification system proved itself. Some of the defenders were injured but no one was killed.

Prime Minister David Ben Gurion visited the site a few days after it was liberated from the siege and said:

Whoever went through this hell deserves a medal of the highest rank.

Despite their heroic stand, at the war's end, the battle-weary members of Beit Eshel decided to move north. There, they established Moshav HaYogev in the Jezreel Valley.

The story of sacrifice, standing strong and pure dedication to the idea of settling the Negev still inspires us today.

You are invited to continue to the next audio stations and hear more about the site.