

The story of Beit Eshel: an accessible text in English

Welcome to Beit Eshel. It was here, in 1943, on land owned by the Jewish National Fund, that this very unique settlement developed.

Beit Eshel is an amazing but short-term success story of settlement and agriculture. The community was abandoned after the War of Independence in 1948, officially ending after 5 and 1/2 years of prosperity.

In the early years of the renewal of the Zionist enterprise, most of the Jewish settlements were concentrated in the center and north of the country. At the same time, in the south and the Negev desert, huge areas were almost completely empty of development or population.

It was clear to the leaders that there was a need to gain control over this land. But was it even possible to maintain normal life in such a deserted and difficult place?

The task of studying this challenging question was given to the JNF – the Jewish National Fund.

Lands purchased in the Negev were transferred to the JNF to take the responsibility for settling, taking care of and protecting them.

Under the leadership of Yosef Veitz, the JNF decided to establish 3 agricultural research stations in the Negev on land purchased from the local Bedouin. These were Gvulot, Revivim and Beit Eshel. They were remote communities with the mission to conduct agricultural experiments and to learn how to cope with the climate, the land and the water resources in the region.

The moshavim, or cooperative farm movement, received the responsibility for Beit Eshel and transferred it to the HaYogev group. The group included young people from Austria, who had been living at that time in a temporary camp in the Jezereel Valley. They could not even begin to imagine how vastly different their lives would be in the desert.

After first finding essential water sources here, the green light to begin building the settlement was given.

In the summer of 1943, 5 HaYogev members climbed on a flatbed truck, loaded it with a tractor, a few tents, food supplies and some equipment and hit the road. After a long drive, they reached this very site and began turning their vision into a reality. The place, that was meant to include only 12 single men, quickly developed into a small community.

The agricultural experiments were successful, cultural life blossomed and men and women from all over the country came to join the Negev settlement project. The settlers searched continuously for new sources of income and constantly developed

new branches of their economy. Their fields stretched to the horizon from one end to the other.

At the other audio systems at this site you can hear more about what life was like here. But for now, listen to how the community evolved.

During its 5 years of prosperity Beit Eshel turned into the largest Jewish community in the Negev with more than 100 residents including women and children.

Yaira Berger, one of the first members tells her story:

At the center of the yard there was a circular lawn where all the cribs stood. In the mornings, we took the children on walks outside the walls. The children had a normal day. At 4 PM when day care was over, they returned to their parents and stayed with them until the next morning.

The relations between the community and their Bedouin neighbors were good. One of the leaders of Beit Eshel, Dan Baron, was actively committed to improving cooperation between the two.

The success story of Beit Eshel took a dramatic turn, however. On November 29th 1947 the UN passed a resolution stating that the country would be divided between the Jews and the Arabs. This decision created a turning point for the community.

Barrages of shootings on the settlement became a daily routine. The deterioration situation caused the residents to send the children and the mothers out of the community. The others had to stay behind to begin fortifying the community against the attacks.

Following the declaration of Independence on May 14th 1948, the Egyptian army invaded the newly established state. An Egyptian force launched heavy bombardment on the community. Beit Eshel was completely destroyed, but the residents did not give up. They knew that their presence in the area was essential and would help dictate the future southern border of Israel.

The site was reinforced and life continued, but in tunnels and underground bunkers. For five months, thousands of shells were fired at Beit Eshel. But despite the terrible conditions in the trenches and the lack of steady supplies, the residents stood their ground.

In October 1948, the war in the Negev front came to an end when Beer Sheva was conquered by Israeli forces. Beit Eshel was liberated from the blockade it had been under but the community was completely destroyed.

By the war's end, the remaining residents decided to return to the north, where they established Moshav HaYogev in the Jezereel Valley.

At another audio station you can hear stories of the days of battles and bravery with detailed descriptions from that period during the war.

החטיבה לחינוך ולקהילה, המחלקה הפדגוגית

Beit Eshel may have existed for only a few short years, but the stories of courage, stubborn determination for the sake of the country, and the steady pioneering spirit witnessed here inspires us all to this very day.

The Division for Education and Community Programs of the JNF wishes you a pleasant and meaningful visit to the site. We invite you to continue to the other audio stations throughout the site and listen to more fascinating stories of Beit Eshel.