

BACK TO THE GUSH

It often doesn't work out that we can see the places that need seeing on a normal tour around Jerusalem. 4000 years of history and archaeology of have left signs and tracks everywhere and there's never enough time on the itinerary.

So places get left out, and that is a great pity. But every now and then I manage to get to a place I think is of first rate importance but which I have neglected for too long. Such a place is the Etzion Bloc, a group of kibbutzim and settlements, and one proper town, in the heart of Judea, halfway between Jerusalem and Hebron. The people I was with had the time so I was happy to take them.

The issue of settlements in the Occupied Territories is high on the list of the world's concerns. Everyone (except us) seems to think that peace between Israel and the Arabs depends on whether a Jewish community lives anywhere on the West Bank or not. The issue is important for the American administration because it doesn't understand what the Middle East conflict is all about¹ so the only thing it knows how to do is lean on us. It is a vital concern of the Palestinians who have made the absolute stopping of settlements the chief demand for re-starting negotiations (as if they are doing us a favor by negotiating). And, of course, the settlement issue is important for our own government which has to juggle between its own right wing and left wing, and the Americans, Europeans, United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon and everybody else. Fortunately for us, Bibi is good at juggling.

Well, consider the case of Gush Etzion and let us decide together the legitimacy of Jewish settlement in the pre-1967 Territories.

1. MIGDAL EDER. A group of Yemenite Jews purchased a plot of land in 1926 and settled there. That community lasted until the Arab riots of August, 1929. By the time those riots were over, 67 Jews had been murdered in Hebron, the British had evacuated the survivors to Jerusalem, and 3000 years of Jewish presence in Hebron came to an end. The nearby settlement of Migdal Eder of course collapsed.

2. ETZION. In 1936 an energetic and prosperous citrus grower named Shmuel Holtzmann bought the land and began a campaign to re-settle it under the name Kefar Etzion ("Etz" means tree in Hebrew, as does "Holtz" in German). That settlement began promisingly but was perforce abandoned when the Arab riots of 1936-39, inspired by the same Haj Amin el-Husseini, Mufti of Jerusalem, who had instigated the 1929 massacres, devastated the countryside.

¹ A clue: it's about legitimacy, not geography.

3. The GUSH. A third attempt to settle the land began in 1943. The original kibbutz Kefar Etzion was, in time, joined by two other religious kibbutzim and one secular one and its land increased by the purchase of church property and lands of the Jewish National Fund. Thus the "Gush," the Bloc, stood ready to defend itself when the UN Partition Plan of November, 1947 divided Mandatory Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State, and the Gush found itself right in the middle of the part allocated to the Arabs.

The results were agonizing, if predictable. The Gush survived attacks and ambushes on the roads all through the last part of 1947 and first part of 1948. Until a 2-day all-out attack by the Arab Legion, with its British officers, destroyed Kefar Etzion on May 13th 1948, the day before the declaration of the founding of the State. The 100 surviving defenders of Kefar Etzion, who had surrendered to the Legion, were then abandoned by the Legion and its British officers to the tender mercies of the local Arab gangs who butchered them all. There were 4 who weren't there that day²; they were the survivors. Altogether 151 Jews were killed in the battle for the Gush.

4. AND NOW. Now the 4th try at settling the land is going very well. Some of the returnees are the children of those who were murdered in 1948. Kefar Etzion is a religious kibbutz with a healthy agricultural and industrial base, and is joined by half a dozen other kibbutzim and community settlements in the area, and the new town of Ephrat (with some 10,000 people) across the road.

That's why it's important to visit the Gush

I haven't been able to think of one good reason why Jews should not be living again in the Gush³. It's their own property and fruit of their own sacrifice. And I always liked visiting there, if only as a show of solidarity.

But not only for solidarity. The ride through the Judean hills is really beautiful, lined with well-kept terraces, evidence of traditional Arab farming. The villagers are growing the grapes for which the Hebron Hills have been famous since Numbers 13:23.

And Kefar Etzion has set up a multi-media presentation next to the old museum which is comprehensive and deeply moving. It is a beautiful half-hour drive leading us to an important piece of Israeli history that needs to be more widely known. Glad we finally got there! ■

² One of whom was my late, lamented fellow guide and friend, Ya'akov Penini.

³ Except for the fact that the Arabs hate it.