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PROGRAMS AND RESIDENTS

Two leaders have the collective responsibility for directing kibbutz programs. The Mazkira, on her second term, must make certain that members and the scores of visitors reflecting the many activities on the kibbutz are cared for appropriately.

It is easy to notice the college graduate level students who make up the two dozen members of the Arava Institute. A visible few are Muslim young women wearing their burka headdresses in the dining room. The old turkey run is obviously running smoothly with its classrooms and offices for the Institute.

In order to review the other activities and sustenance programs I turned to Roy Kagan, the kibbutz Business Manager whose office is next to that of the Mazkira. His immediate response to my query, "How goes it?" was quick and positive. The growth of dates and their sale is still the best and steadiest income producer. Next is milk production. In each case, expansion preparations are under way.

New date trees have been planted near the producing groves and look as if they are maturing beautifully. Reports on the care of the date palms has been reported by me in previous years. If anything, its production is steady and income assured.

I had the pleasure of joining my son, Seth, when he checked out the condition of the cowsheds. The major problem was obvious; there was a need

for more and better shade for the current cowherd, let alone a contemplated expansion. The care with which the herd is handled reflects the importance of added income.

It was the third income–line which surprised me. The salaries of members whose skills serve area needs are in this category. Working for others like the Arava Institute, as the main employer; a good bookkeeper is part of this income producing section, by serving multiple employers in the region.

Roy also reported that algae production was recovering after two years of stagnation. Last year, 2009, produced the highest income from this source ever achieved. The manager, Chagai Tsur, who once travelled for over an hour each way to his office, has moved to Eilat, to live nearby.

I was also surprised to hear that the production of ornamental fish is still being pursued. The current focus is on growing ‘mud–suckers’ who live on the tanks’ bottom and keep it clean. It is yet to become an economical business.

Another income line, though not large, is Keren Kolot Tours. Hopefully it should improve after problems with foreign currency exchange are resolved. The good outlook is the increase in Israeli visitors.

The Sieman’s Corporation has an investment of 15 million shkolim in an attempt to produce electric power from the sun. A field of fifteen units is now being created and should expand beginning in early 2010. They should be positioned east of the date groves across the highway.

A long–term investment in the Eilat Fisheries has not yet returned to its former profitability. Activity is now off the Ashdod coast, no longer in Eilat. Production is based on an artificial harbor. New cages have been added , and the assets of an existing fish farm were bought ‘dirt cheap’. It’s already in place ten kilometers off shore. Kibbutz member Ed Hofland is Chairman of the Board of Directors in this undertaking.

Added to the above is a partnership with Kibbutz Dan in the production of caviar. (No, they don’t give away samples.) I was also amazed to learn that the product is sold for 800 Euros per kilo, wholesale!

Additional tidbits regarding kibbutz economics are:

1. More than 50 members out of 140 work for salary outside of the kibbutz
2. A new date tree field of 200 dunam has been planted near Eilat. The overall total yield this year will be 80 tons.

3. New families have been accepted as members and the necessary homes are now built for them.
4. Loans are being paid off. The final payments to both the Jewish Agency and Israeli Government will be made soon!
5. There is no tax on income from date fields, though competition has increased substantially!

WATER AND THE ARAVA

A most unique group visited Ketura during our stay – English speaking veterans of World War II. Dr. Clive Lipkin, a lecturer at the Arava Institute of Desert Studies, presented a review of water programs along Israel's eastern border.

Involved in the presentation were the interests of Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, as well as the Jewish State. He noted that there are two aquifers in the region along the Mediterranean, which currently have the capacity to supply only 270 to 300 meters of water per person annually. This compares to 9,710 meters per person in the United States. In this corner of the Near East, the population is doubling every 40 years, and agriculture demands from 57% to 62% annually, even now. He noted that the National Water Carrier brings water to the population centers along the western seashore which would normally flow into the Jordan River, and eventually the Dead Sea.

Pollution becomes a problem because many Palestinian users fail to treat their sewerage when disposing of waste. When driving along the Dead Sea shores, we noticed enormous sinkholes (drying up from lack of water) in the exposed retreating shoreline of the Dead Sea. This evidence is bound to endanger the tourist and agricultural investments on both sides of the Dead Sea, and probably the entire Arava.

Desalinization plants in Ashkelon, Hadera, and Palmachim have relieved, somewhat, the need for a new Haifa facility. A new tax on the use of water and setting limits to garden watering will probably make some difference in water being used more carefully. Drilling of fifteen new wells, and the recovery of polluted wells has helped the drought situation. Hopefully the Kinneret and the Dead Sea water levels will not decline any further. Problems are found in maintaining operations of the potash plants on the Dead Sea. A strong concern

exists in the possibility of earthquakes along the African Rift. These could happen anytime!

Of special interest are the moves made by Jordan in funding the project for the connection between the Red and Dead Seas. Initiated in 2002, the World Bank has already provided 15 million dollars for research. We should note that this project has the cooperative support of Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

A most significant fact is the choice of the Arava Institute in Ketura to carry out this research project, which gives us hope that the cooperation of all regional powers exists to find effective solutions. Most exciting is that our lecturer, who is most involved, feels that research is on track to be completed this year, and that construction will be taking place in the coming five years.

THE ISRAELI AIR FORCE

Israel's fledgling air force was unique in that it was born in battle and most of the personnel were volunteers. In 1948 I had the good fortune of playing a small role in this process. Over 50 years later, I was able to read about this unprecedented historic item while visiting Seth, Susie, and their family in Ketura.

In a discussion with the retired Mazkir, Moshe Falkoff, I mentioned that I had entered the American Jewish-Israel government civil service. A day later he handed me an article on Israel's volunteers, which was found in the "Jewish Virtual Library".

Teddy Kolleck, who highlighted his long political career as Mayor of Jerusalem, recruited me in 1948. I was the Chair of the Columbia University Chapter of IZFA in New York. His request was that I postpone writing my Master's thesis, return to Boston, my home, and recruit retired aviators from World War II, for Israel's Army Air Corps in the making. The information in the article by Eddy Kaplansky contained the following items, some completely new to me:

1. Overseas volunteers were involved as early as November 1947 when the Haganah set up its own air service (Sherut Avir) in British controlled Palestine.
2. Some 70% were overseas volunteers from 15 different countries

3. These served in all capacities: pilots, navigators, radio operators, air gunners, etc. Of 205 World War II pilots in the IAF, 181 were Machal or overseas volunteers.
4. Britain and the United States Air Corps provided most of them.
5. The air bridge from Czechoslovakia was their most important achievement.
6. The commanding officers of most squadrons active in the War for Independence were Machal or outside volunteers.
7. The skills of the men were the key element stopping the Egyptian Army in its advance to Tel Aviv in 1948.
8. I was always in error in believing that there were no radar specialists involved. Israel's 505 Squadron boasted a few in 1948.
9. Of the 33 IAF fliers killed or missing, 19 were Machal, the largest group from the United States. Others came from Canada, Britain, and South Africa.

THE NEW GAS TANK

We don't usually concern ourselves about the source of our cooking fuel. At home in America or Great Britain, we usually use gas; some have electricity as their source of heat. In Ketura there are gas tanks and connecting pipes for the needs of the dining room and another for the laundry and milking shed. The gas company Amisragaz chose our first week of our visit to change the tank located along the entrance to the rear of the hadar ochel.

The replacement tank was about fifteen feet in length and five feet in diameter. It lay at least five more feet below the surface. I learned that it had been installed in 1994, so I presumed that fifteen years of use required a change. The company arrived with two vehicles, one a mammoth digging machine.

For two hours, the sand and soil around the old tank had to be removed. Seth's task was to transport this covering to the empty lot near the front gate. Finally, the old tank was removed and the new one installed. In reply to my question, I was told that the replacement was built in 1979, but fully refurbished this year and should last up to fifteen more years.

The reason this story appears is more complicated. As the soil was being replaced over the pipes a half meter below, Seth heard a hissing sound - there

had to be a leak somewhere. Now came the serious problem: it was already late in the day. The digging machine had left, and there was 30 meters of piping to check out. Seth began to make phone calls; all responded speedily. Twelve diggers showed up; more than half were the Thailand field workers. Two hours later the entire pipe (in 100 feet of trench) was uncovered. The leak was found and the piping replaced. It was a little past 5 P.M.

It had been a very long day, but the kitchen had heat, and the food that depended on a gas supply was ready when the dining room opened for the evening meal. No one guessed, that evening, how close they were to find their supper limited to salad.

A BAR AND BAT MITZVAH AT KETURAH

By Irv Slott and Greta Kessler

December and January had special meaning to the English speaking families who gathered from abroad for the Bat Mitzvahs of Shir Kessler, Tair Shliserman, and Hedi Erez Slott, and the Bar Mitzvah of Etai Gat. The families of Sharon Letofsky and Marcello Shliserman, and Udi and Tova Gat all had good reason to celebrate their children's Bat and Bar Mitzvahs.

As in every Jewish community, a Bar/ Bat Mitzvah at Ketura is a joyous occasion. Families arrive from near and far, attending Friday evening services, hearing the review of the week, and the choir's lovely melodies (led by Bill Slott), which introduced Shabbat dinner.

Extra curricular tiyulim (hikes) around Ketura are planned, post Shabbat barbeques, and parties are part of the multi-celebrations. In this small close-knit community, all look upon each event as their own.

Gathered for Shabbat services, family members and friends were called upon for various honors. All the youngsters, Shir, Hedi, Tair, and Etai performed flawlessly and gave insightful D'var Torah comments. Hedi's Torah portion, Vayechi, wherein Jacob blesses the younger son, was read by Hedi, the youngest in her family.

The class of each Bat and bar Mitzvah sang original songs, and gifts were presented by Sara Cohen, the Mazkira.

Kiddush bachutz, outside the Merkaz, was an amazing display of chips, dips, stuffed grape leaves, and homemade cakes and cookies, punch and wine.

This is followed by a special lunch, and a giant decorated cake, baked by Ted, the local pastry chef.

Saturday evening's party, either in the Merkaz or the dining room, was full of entertainments: funny skits, projected pictures of the celebrant's life, musical presentations, and tributes. Desserts were homemade and seemed endless on long tables. Happy faces over the plates with assorted sweets, everyone enjoying a party with music surrounding – a great way to celebrate and remember a very special day!

THE KESSLER FELLOWSHIP

As noted by Leah Kayman in the 2008 Ketura Highlights, the remains of the Kessler Fellowship Fund was turned over to Ketura's Merkaz Hashachar in the amount of \$43,000. During the latest visit of the Kesslers, a plaque was unveiled in the presence of Greta, Irving and Seth in the remodeled Merkaz. The Kesslers hope that the new furniture will be enjoyed by all the members and friends in Ketura.

THE ANIMAL CORNER

Almost two years later, the small zoo at the first corner to the north off the main entrance road is still functioning. The only real differences are the addition of a chicken coop and the absence of the two goats.

Regarding the goats: I was fortunate to find Tiki Kagan feeding the rabbits and hamsters when I arrived at the corner zoo. "Well", she exclaimed, "They were always getting out and wandering throughout the kibbutz". The complaints were enough to justify selling them. "Today", she added, "I found five eggs in the hen house. My assumption is that the family diet has improved".

For those still interested, the rabbits are fat and content and occupy most of the cages. The hamster population is reduced to one cage with about five or six inhabitants. The corner is still an interesting stop for those seeking exercise by the circumferential road.

