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10 years since disengagement

Three evacuees from Gush Katif revisit the trauma and the struggle to move forward

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According to the app Waze, Netzer Hazani still exists. Netzer Hazani was never supposed to exist on anyone's GPS system. It was supposed to be gone 10 years ago, one of the 21 Jewish settlements of Gaza wiped off the map, well, at least until now.

The tenacity of the Netzer Hazani residents to stay together as a community has propelled them to rebuild Netzer Hazani 20 kilometers east of Ashdod.

Gush Katif communities and their supporters commemorate the destruction of Gush Katif not on its secular anniversary, August 15, but on Tisha Be'av, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar marking the destruction of the Holy Temples and the litany of other Jewish catastrophes over the centuries.

In the summer of 2005, Tisha Be'av fell on August 14. While the "exile" of these 9,000 "settlers," as they're often called, can't compare in scope to the loss of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land over 2,000 years ago, to them Gush Katif is a microcosm, a tragedy made worse by it being inflicted by fellow Jews.

The first Gush Katif settlements were established in the 1970s on sand dunes in the Gaza Strip to create five "fingers" of contiguous Jewish settlement that would cut terrorist pathways in Gaza.

Without checkpoints at the time, the residents of Gush Katif would go shopping in the Arab towns of Khan Yunis and Rafah.

Arab-Jewish coexistence deteriorated with the first intifada, which erupted in 1987, and then with the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which divided Gaza along Arab and Jewish lines and armed the newly established Palestinian Authority.

Coexistence came to a complete end with the second intifada in 2000, which saw thousands of mortar shells and Kassam rockets land on Gush Katif homes and fields, with roadside bombings and shootings taking dozens of lives, of soldiers and civilians alike.

Still, the residents never wanted to leave, believing retreat would be a capitulation to terrorism. Nor did they want to abandon the lives they loved in this agricultural community, known best for producing bug-free vegetables grown in sand through a hydroponic method.

In 2003, then-prime minister Ariel Sharon decreed an end to Jewish life in Gaza for reasons that are still the subject of debate, and the majority of Gush Katif residents put up a fight, refusing to pack up and leave on the day the soldiers came to knock on their doors. Their prayers weren't answered, and that summer produced the most iconic image of Jewish civil strife: IDF soldiers dragging Jews out of their homes.

Upon driving through the new Netzer Hazani, I was pleased to see the revival of a community whose tribulations I had followed over the years. The new, inviting desert-style homes form a quaint residential village, and the openness is a welcome contrast to the depressing, cramped villages of "caravillas," a government euphemism for the prefab temporary housing structures, where I had visited evacuees several times as they plowed through the bureaucracy required to build their permanent homes.

The reestablishment of Netzer Hazani, once a farming community, was never supposed to be a victory; it was supposed to be a given following the forced displacement by the Sharon government, a displacement I experienced as an infiltrator into Gush Katif that fateful summer and later researched on assignment for *The Jerusalem Post* while setting out to complete my novel, *The Settler*, about a young woman who experiences a crisis of faith – in the State of Israel, in her fellow Jews, and in God – after she loses everything dear to her.

EINAT BLOCH YEFET, 28, was one of the women I interviewed eight years ago for a *Metro* cover story, "Losing their homes – and their religion" (April 25, 2007), about the shaken attitudes toward Orthodox Judaism that the disengagement – or as most call it, the "expulsion" – had triggered among some of the youth.

In 2000, Yefet's brother Itamar was shot in the neck by a terrorist while on his way to build a fence around the Kfar Darom settlement. Despite the pain of his death and the mounting terrorist attacks in Gaza, her idealism gave her the strength to go on and emerge as a teenage community leader, lobbying the government to repeal the Disengagement Law and making the case for Gush Katif in the media.

She was more hurt by what she views as the treachery of the Israeli government than by the murder of her brother. On the day of the pullout, her father lit a memorial candle for Itamar in their home in Netzer Hazani, and she bawled as her father took down their mezuza.

She is no longer the broken, confused, angry 20-year-old I remember.

"I could go on all night how they screwed us, how cruel it was, how illegal it was, how ≫

THE DESTROYED house of Reut Israeli in the settlement of Neveh Dekalim. (Courtesy Reut Israeli)

'I could go on all night how they screwed us, how cruel it was and bring up all the terrible memories – but it doesn't take you anywhere...'

– Einat Bloch Yefet

SHLOMI BASHAN as a child in the settlement of Atzmona and (right) as a teenager near his family's home. (Courtesy Shlomi Bashan)

A CABIN outside the Bashan house, of which Shlomi has fond memories. (Courtesy Shlomi Bashan)

much corruption was involved, how evil they were – and bring up all the terrible memories – but it doesn't take you anywhere; it actually takes you backwards," she says, late at night, over coffee in her kitchen. The handiwork of her husband, a wood craftsman and carpenter, gives her two-story home a warm, individual touch.

Yefet has not lost her gift of articulating her feelings and giving voice to the frustrations, despondency and fears of her community, even as she learns to find her own peace.

The apparent beauty of their new community shouldn't fool anyone.

"It's a community in rehabilitation," Yefet says. "The entire community is together now. My neighbors are my childhood friends, but these 10 years were a black hole."

I first met Yefet when she lived in this "black hole." She was in and out of Israel, an honored guest – or more like an adopted daughter – of an American family in Florida who empathized with the Gush Katif evacuees and were glad to give her a time-out from Israel.

She never stopped observing Shabbat (although she tried once and couldn't manage it), but she had relaxed her observance and adopted a more secular mind-set.

"I thought only about myself – not God or anything else," she had said back then. She has since returned to religious faith and observance, and now she sees that God never really abandoned her.

"When I came back to Israel after a few months, I realized that He was there all the time. I just didn't want to see Him. How would you explain that two days after they took us out of Gush Katif, and we were in Jerusalem, a couple comes up to ask to speak to someone from Netzer Hazani?"

To this day, she considers this Florida couple as guardian angels, having so generously taken care of her emotional well-being and material needs, as her own parents coped with the loss of their home and successful spice farm.

Yefet's life's work giving lectures and workshops on overcoming trauma draws from her experience of the pullout.

"A month since they expelled us, I was invited to speak somewhere. For 10 years, people would call me and ask me to speak. On the one hand, it was important for me to carry the torch, that people hear the story, that they know about Gush Katif and how bad what happened was. It was a type of therapy."

THE DESIRE to leave the country after the disengagement/expulsion was common among evacuees. I met Shlomi Bashan eight years ago after I discovered a pamphlet of poems he wrote – angry, hard-hitting poems – with one describing a scene that has him happily drinking beer at a German pub during wartime in Israel, while he, as a former IDF officer, refused to fight for his countrymen.

It was only after pouring all of his thoughts on paper, uncensored, that he was able to find release from a depression and restlessness that brought him to the brink of suicide.

When he was five years old, Bashan's family moved from Jerusalem to Atzmona, a settlement once home to the largest flower nursery in Israel. The year was 1985, and they joined the evacuees from Yamit, the settlement in Sinai evacuated as part of Israel's peace treaty with Egypt. His family eventually made their way to Neveh Dekalim, the most urban settlement, and built a home for his family of nine.

On the day of the pullout, he and his family tried to talk and reason with the soldiers, to no avail. They packed some belongings to get them through the next few weeks, got on the bus, and left. It took his parents about six years to build a permanent home in

THE SITE of the temporary 'caravillas' evacuees were moved to, now emptying out as people are given more permanent residence. (Orit Arfa)

the new Neveh Dekalim neighborhood of Nitzan. Last year, Bashan affixed the mezuza to his own home in Tekoa in Gush Etzion.

Now 35 years old, Bashan welcomes me with his wife, journalist and singer Karni Eldad, the daughter of former MK Aryeh Eldad, a respected voice of the secular Right. Bashan has found his peace from his very dark days, in part through Karni's encouragement and especially through building a home of his own.

"This last year, because of the fact that I have a house, it's a turning point. Something healed – not all the way, but I knew the first thing I had to do was to build a house."

His eye for architecture is visible in the wood paneling of the home he designed. He had abandoned his studies in architecture at Ariel University at the time of the pullout so that he could fight against the disengagement, attending protests, giving tours of Gush Katif and sneaking in protesters to fortify the resistance.

"I couldn't see my life as normal, like those of other people my age without a house, because it was something lost to me."

He stopped wearing his kippa after the disengagement, but he never became a heretic. Intellectual questions about the existence of God bothered him less than the question of how man could be so cruel to fellow man. Today, he describes himself as "traditional" and is glad to give his two sons a traditional Jewish upbringing. What broke him most was the lack of empathy of those around him.

"I felt like I was in this alone," he says. "People even blamed me, were angry with me, held me responsible."

After a whirlwind tour of Europe – Switzerland, Germany, France, Austria and Hungary – he returned to Israel. Call it, in Yefet's words, "the hand of God" that the perfect job opened up for him: managing the Gush Katif Museum in Jerusalem, which provided an outlet to memorialize the place he missed so much through expanding the collection of maps, flags, memorabilia and Gush Katif icons, like the large menorah from the synagogue of the Netzarim settlement.

"It gave me an opportunity to cry out," he says.

REUT ISRAELI, formerly Reut Dahan, wasn't as politically or communally involved as Yefet and Bashan in the fight against the expulsion. Twenty years old at the time of the pullout, she was simply seeking to live her life uninterrupted as a young woman about to start college after national service.

I had been with her on her last Shabbat with her family before the interruption came. Their two-story home glistened, furniture intact, as her mother served her delicious Moroccan specialties in their best china. A few days later, soldiers knocked on their door. The Dahan family folded the Israeli flag at the entrance to their house, took down the mezuza, and left without physically resisting. For the next few weeks they were housed in an IDF rest and recreation complex in Ashkelon.

Fortunately, Israeli's father kept his job at a bank outside Gush Katif, while many of his peers who had lost their farms or jobs in Gush Katif felt too old to reenter the workforce. He and his wife managed to build a beautiful two-story permanent home in the new Neveh Dekalim neighborhood in Nitzan. Israeli still lives in a prefab at the temporary housing site nearby, which these days is emptying out.

According to the Gush Katif Committee, an NGO that advocates on behalf of the Gush Katif residents, all but three of the Gush Katif settlement communities have been rebuilt throughout Israel; some have created new towns named after their former ones, while others have joined existing towns.

PRIME MINISTER Ariel Sharon in March 2005. (Gil Cohen Magen/Reuters)

For years afterward, Assaf couldn't even step into a synagogue. On his first Shabbat as an expellee, he smoked a cigarette, on purpose

Of the approximately 1,300 families that have chosen to stick with their communities, 900 have settled into permanent homes, 170 are in the process of building them, and 200 families have still not found solutions.

Israeli and her husband, Assaf, ≫

PRESIDENT REUVEN RIVLIN visits with Shlomi Bashan (right) at the Gush Katif museum in Jerusalem. (Courtesy Shlomi Bashan)

'People who didn't fight for their homes, who didn't resist, it was very hard for them. They have a tortured conscience'

– Einat Bloch Yefet

REUT ISRAELI'S house in Neveh Dekalim. (Courtesy Reut Israeli)

are waiting to implement plans for a town house near her parents' home.

"The fact that you have this 'caravilla' site after 10 years – it says it all," Reut says, from the sofa of the living room of this two-bedroom structure, which will be disassembled once they move out.

I last interviewed Reut and Assaf eight years ago, when both had left the religious fold in varying degrees. In fact, Assaf's story influenced the expulsion scene in my novel. He and his family could have staved off the army for hours with their pleas and maneuvering, but in the end their rabbi came and asked them to leave – a dramatic trigger that made him lose trust in religious institutions.

For years afterward, Assaf couldn't even step into a synagogue. On his first Shabbat as an expellee, he smoked a cigarette, on purpose. Reut, his girlfriend at the time, also stopped observing Shabbat not long after the pullout. She moved to a secular kibbutz near Sderot while studying toward a degree in communication at Sapir College.

Today, Reut, a Hebrew teacher, lights Shabbat candles and observes the traditional day of rest; Assaf keeps up tradition as well, probably more for her than for him, Reut says. She wears pants and doesn't cover her hair as does her more Orthodox, recently married younger sister. She had witnessed a breakdown in faith among her peers and in her own family; the disengagement, she reasons, must have influenced the secularization of one of her brothers. Her other younger brother, however, has kept his kippa on.

"After the expulsion and until today, there are a lot of people who were religious and who aren't anymore," she says. "You can't say for sure it's because of the expulsion, but as youth develop their identity, they only need one trigger."

She has also noticed that, in some cases, the opposite has occurred. Friends of hers who once ate pork in religious defiance now grow *peyot* (side locks).

About a month ago, she and her family opened albums of their home and garden in Gush Katif, and it brought back good memories, but she doesn't carry the pain of the loss all the time.

"I really compare it to death. It's not something you can forget. It's where you grew up. It will always be in your heart, but life is strong at the end of the day."

ADVOCATES OF the disengagement sometimes argue that had the Gush Katif residents cooperated with the government, they might have been better off, both emotionally and materially. Yefet dismisses this argument out of hand, comparing their threatened homes to someone with cancer whose life you have to fight for.

"People who didn't fight for their homes, who didn't resist, it was very hard for them," she says. "They have a tortured conscience. They wonder: how did we let this happen? I know I'm at peace with myself. I did what I could."

She wonders if the pullout has staved off a greater tragedy, if the Hamas terrorist tunnels would have reached their homes, making Gush Katif an even bloodier buffer zone than it already was.

"I think at some point God said they don't deserve it," she says. "People who believed so much in the people of Israel, in the nation of Israel – to be sacrifices for people who don't even see them? You could say He saved us, and it all blew up in our faces. It's clear it will continue to happen until we go in and reconquer Gaza – not because we want it, but because the entire nation of Israel will want it."

For Bashan, the loss of Gush Katif has taken on a modest proportion in his life. He just wants to be normal again, focusing on his business specializing in wood construction.

"Gush Katif defines me," Bashan says. "Every day of my life is influenced by the expulsion, draws meaning from it. I'm not crying every day."

He has found a "fun" way to advocate for life beyond the Green Line. He and his wife penned a book about tourism in Judea and Samaria titled *Yesha is Fun* (Yesha being a Hebrew acronym for Judea, Samaria and Gaza) in part to break the stereotypes and misconceptions of the much-maligned settlements and the people who choose to live there.

He counts as his colleagues and friends Palestinian Arabs near his own settlement of Tekoa, believing settlers can be a vehicle for fostering peace.

"The Arabs in Gaza are suffering," Bashan says. "The people who wanted us to leave there hate both us and the Arabs. They don't want what's good for the Arabs. It's just anti-Semitism."

He likes Tekoa for being a religiously mixed community, a model of intra-faith coexistence that he believes may serve to better connect the general population to Jewish life in the West Bank.

When asked if he has learned any lessons about preventing any pending "disengagements" – potentially another from his home in Tekoa – he comes up with one, as an afterthought.

"I have to guard my home," he says. "I have to protect my family. If the government works out a deal that I agree with and that I think is just, and I'm offered a compensation package, I'll pack up and leave. But if there is no agreement, and a soldier comes to my house to evacuate me, he's getting a bullet in his head."

He recalls how in Gush Katif, the government played off the patriotism of the people who saw the IDF soldiers as brothers in arms, thus ensuring the nonviolent withdrawal. Now Bashan would consider any soldier sent to kick him out against his will – no matter what state icons are emblazoned on the uniform – as a criminal, not a brother.

Expecting her second child, Israeli looks back not only on the good times but on the danger in which they lived during their last few years in Gush Katif. She and Yefet are not sure they'd go back to live in Gush Katif as the sitting ducks they once were.

"If it was to the period of my childhood, I'd go back today," Yefet says.

Not all circles, however, have been closed. In some cases, the confrontation between the government agents and the residents of Gush Katif may be more like parallel lines that will never meet. Right after they were forced to leave their home, Yefet's father had given the soldier their mezuza and told him to come back to affix it to the Yefets' new home, which has since been rebuilt a block away from Einat's home.

"He never came back, and we never found him," Einat says, with bitterness. "And when we asked our connections to track him down, he apparently didn't want to meet with us. But the mezuza is still with him."

Yefet chooses not to focus on what makes her cry.

"People say we're crybabies – I'm so not in that place," Yefet says. "I think of everything we've received, and I say 'thank you.' And I don't think it was the right move, but I think, without a doubt, that it was the hand of God." ■