

Where Have All the Flowers Gone?

By Yael Ehrenpreis Meyer

It is three days until Shavuot and all is quiet on the streets of Nitzan. Silence and emptiness shatter abruptly as an immense truck appears. A bearded man emerges from the truck. A smiling woman materializes from the adjacent caravan. The two exchange a few words. Then both disappear.

Suddenly, signs of life can be seen amidst this small town on Israel's southern coast. Men stride rapidly, women lug children in tow, teenagers amble along, all stopping as one behind the box-filled truck. Acting in tandem, a choreographed composition performed many times before, each one plays his part: men stand ready to catch boxes heaved from above; the women have gone inside, where their voices can be heard, "How many per bag? How many for each family?"

Disengagement Timeline: 2005

- Midnight of Aug. 14 — official deadline for Jewish residency in Gaza — it becomes illegal for Jews to live in Gaza

- Aug. 15-16 — 48 hour "grace period" for Jews to pack up and leave Gaza (if they have not yet done so)

- Aug. 17 — Forced evacuations of Jewish residents of Gaza by police and soldiers begins.

- Aug. 22 — the last Jews are evacuated from Gaza

- Aug. 24 — Evacuation of all 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza and four settlements in the northern Shomron is complete

- Aug. 28 — Beginning of removal of the 48 bodies in the Gush Katif cemetery for reburial; an honorary funeral was held in Jerusalem on Sept. 1, prior to the reburial of 15 in the cemetery of the Mount of Olives.

- Sept. 1 — With the demolition of the last house in Neve Dekalim, the demolition of all the evacuated settlements is completed, with a total of 2,530 homes demolished in Gush Katif, and 270 in northern Samaria.

- Sept. 11 — the IDF holds an official ceremony in the now abandoned settlement of Neve Dekalim, closing the Gaza division headquarters, and the last Israeli soldier leaves Gaza the next morning, Sept. 12. The settlements' 19 synagogues are left intact. All 19 would later be decimated by the region's incoming Palestinian population.

"I used to drive down to Gush Katif, where each farmer would give me boxes of produce to distribute to Israel's needy. Today, I drive down to Nitzan — and I give those same farmers boxes we have collected for them. And so the givers have now been forced to receive. ..." (Yossi, Yad Ezra driver)

Gan-Ohr resident Rivka once ran her community's *gemach*, the regional headquarters for distribution of produce donated by Gush Katif's agricultural producers to feed Israel's poor. Today Rivka still runs the *gemach*. She is still surrounded by her one-time neighbors from Gush Katif. But she no longer lives in a flourishing town on the Gaza coast, and her neighbors no longer contribute their crops. Instead, those same Yad Ezra drivers who once collected from the region's farmers now donate to them instead, delivering produce weekly, and in partnership with the National Council of Young Israel, dispatching huge trucks filled with food before major Jewish holidays.

"My husband and I made aliyah from Chicago in 1980. Four years later we moved to Gush Katif. Twenty-one years later, we were expelled from our homes. ... It feels like a punishment for something we didn't do: Even if we finally get a place to build, we have no money to build it with — without a salary, all our savings have been used to feed our children." (Lisa, former Gan-Ohr resident)

The system works like clockwork. The trucks pull up, with their thousands of pounds of fruits and vegetables, hundreds of egg trays, cases of drinks and boxes of snacks, along with the Shavuot specialties — 15,000 bottles of regular and chocolate milk, 5,000 yogurts, 10,000 containers of cheeses, 5,000 puddings, and more. ...

Rivka immediately sends out the call to her volunteers. All rush to unload, stack, sort and bag the thousands of food items for pickup. It is a rare opportunity for these once self-sufficient individuals to feel that they are on the giving, rather



Yad Ezra drivers who once collected food from Gush Katif farmers are now donating to them.

than receiving, end. Once the packages are ready, the next stage goes into gear: Always sensitive to maintaining the dignity of her neighbors, Rivka calls only a few families at a time, saying: "Your food is here." As one shift leaves the next arrives, ensuring that order reigns, even as cars arrive from as close by as Sderot and as far away as the Golan.

"After Yom Kippur, I asked myself: 'How will I feed my children this Sukkos?'" one resident said. "It was the middle of the afternoon: My sons and I put on tefillin, and we davened minchah as though it were Yom Kippur again, crying and pleading: 'Hashem, we did our part, now You do Yours.' We finished our tefillos ... and the telephone rang. It was Rivka: 'There are boxes of food waiting for you. ...'" (Rabbi Pesach Lerner, Executive Vice-President, National Council of Young Israel).

This well-ordered system of giving, and the relationship it reflects between the National Council of Young Israel (NCYI)

and the Gush Katif communities, began four years ago. Disengagement loomed on the horizon. A 50-person Young Israel mission came to spend Shabbos with those who even then continued to hope for a miracle. It was the "beginning of a beautiful friendship" between NCYI and these "baalei emunah and bitachon," one that has been compelled to outlast the very homes of those new friends.

In those first autumn weeks after the evacuation, as families faced Rosh Hashanah and Sukkos stranded in cramped hotel rooms, 10,000 boxes of clothing arrived in Israel, the result of a massive clothing drive coordinated by the National Council. With the onset of winter came Chanukah — along with a new watch for every child. Adar followed, and NCYI provided costumes for each child: a bit of *simchah* to make every family smile on Purim day.

"Even growing up in Wisconsin, I knew that I would someday make aliyah. Years later, my husband and I came to Israel, to Gush Katif. We found our home. ... Even the constant attacks could not drive us away, for we felt a strong sense of purpose: We were reclaiming our land. And how green we made it! The land blossomed with us, and we blossomed with our land. ..." (Rachel, former Neve Dekalim resident).

Gush Katif was once home to 9,000 Jews, a *kibbutz galuyot* of native Israelis and *olim*, Torah scholars and teachers, agricultural experts and former city-dwellers. Much of this region of Eretz Yisrael was about farming: the famous "Gush Katif lettuce," other bug-free leafy vegetables, the nation's largest plant nursery and second-largest dairy, and two-thirds of Israel's exported cherry tomatoes, organic vegetables, and geraniums. But there were also

shops and schools, administrators and *avreichim*. "Torah v'Avodah," a life centered on religious observance combined with working the land of Israel and making it grow, stood firm as the mandate of Gush Katif.

But then came the decision of the Israeli government to "disengage" from Gush Katif. Its residents protested and prayed for a reversal of the decree. But all too soon it was Aug. 15, 2005 — three days after Tishah B'Av, with its legacy of tragedy for the Jewish people. We watched aghast, tears streaming, as Israeli soldiers entered the 25 Jewish settlements. As small children looked into the eyes of soldiers there to take them from their homes and begged to be allowed to stay. As soldiers and residents joined together to daven, eat, sing, one last time. As grown men wept in bidding farewell to the homes they had built, the farms they had cultivated, the gardens they had planted; as mothers carried the children they had raised from the homes in which they raised them.

Julia was once a happy wife and mother, living in the Gush Katif town of Nisanit. Tragedy struck when Julia's daughter came home from school one day — to find her father collapsed on the floor. The family was still dealing with this loss when the day came ... the soldiers came ... and the home they had built and loved was no more.

The government promised a "solution for every resident." They guaranteed that homes and farms and lives would be built anew. But those promises proved less steadfast than the sand dunes on which the world of Gush Katif once stood. Families were initially placed in hotels "temporarily" — actually months. Then groups were settled in "caravillas" — fancy names for a live-in trailer. Their lives remain "on hold" as they



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Rabbi Pesach Lerner, executive vice president, National Council of Young Israel, helps prepare food packages.

wait for land on which to build, hoping that by the time that day comes, they will still have some savings left with which to reconstruct their homes — and their lives.

2007: Two years since the Disengagement. The evacuation itself, along with the thousands whose lives were overturned, had faded from the headlines. Most members of the global Jewish community assumed that having received the promised financial redress for their losses, the Gush Katif evacuees had rebuilt their homes, farms, and communities in new locations. Few knew the truth: Most families have indeed received “compensation,” a monetary value set by the government as reimbursement for the loss of each home. But they decry the “arbitrary” and “cruelly strict” standards used to define that reimbursement.

Even the few farmers who did receive new land face continued obstacles.

“We had developed a high degree of expertise with our specific land conditions,” explained Rachel. “It is hard to start again — especially since we have to learn a whole new terrain. Besides, we’ve already lost much

of our market share; in the years since the expulsion our agricultural niche has been filled by others.”

Summer 2007: Rabbi Pesach Lerner, executive vice president of the National Council of Young Israel, and Yossi Goldberger of Yad Ezra, decided to combine the resources of their organizations to help the families of Gush Katif. Young Israel has played an active role in helping the Jews of Eretz Yisrael for over 60 years. Yad Ezra, established in the 1950s by the tzaddik, Reb Asher Freund, zt”l, shares that historic commitment to supporting the greater klal. A partnership was established between the two organizations as Pesach Lerner and Yossi Goldberger became a team, united in their passion to bring relief and joy to the abandoned evacuees of Gush Katif.

You answer the phone. It is Yossi Goldberger: “I need you to invite two families for Yom Tov,” comes his request. What Jew would turn down families in need for chag? Your answer: “Of course. Where are they from?” “They live in Israel,” comes Yossi’s reply. “In Israel? But I live in Brooklyn ... Monsey ...

Baltimore ... Teaneck ... L.A. ... Chicago ... Detroit. How will you get them to me?” “Why don’t you give me a check instead — and I’ll make sure Nitzan’s families have food this Pesach. ...”

Yad Ezra drew on its expertise in providing mass-quantity food deliveries to those in need. Meanwhile, Rabbi Lerner advertised the 2007 Sukkos campaign — and Eugen and Jean Gluck of Forest Hills, New York, known for their unceasing generosity to those in need, were among the first to come forward for the cause. That Sukkos, every family received fish, chicken, meat, canned goods, drinks and children’s treats galore. Six months later, the trucks were back, delivering *shemurah matzah*, wine and a plethora of *kosher lePesach* products.

One man approached me after Sukkos. “I want to say thank you for the Coca-Cola you gave us. ... You see, when you’re out of a job, the first thing you give up is soda. But when I put that bottle on our holiday table, my 5-year-old gazed up at me with a look of respect I have not seen for a long time. ‘Abba,’ he beamed, you found a job?” (Shalom, Yad Ezra driver)

That was the beginning. There have been six pre-holiday deliveries since then, each one capitalizing on the cooperative teamwork of donors and drivers, friends and facilitators, those who give generously and those who gratefully receive: Rabbi Lerner and Yossi Goldberger are two men on a mission, driven by the firm belief that they are fulfilling an obligation on a behalf of the nation. And Rivka — no one has enough words for the “*tzadikah*” of Nitzan, the one-woman provider of food and hope to a community desperately in need of both.

“When I bring food to the Gush Katif communities, I see the light and life restored to their eyes. I am reminded how uncertain life is — we think we have everything, but it can all be lost in a moment.” (Yossi Goldberger)

With little land, widespread unemployment and the pressure to save toward a future home, these families can no longer afford to give their children even the essentials. “How long can I tell my children, ‘No, you can’t have that, no, I can’t buy that for you?’” one father cried. Indeed, parents here face the agonizing situation of having to constantly tell their children “no”: “No, we cannot buy or even eat as we once did.”

Even the children seem to have been hit hard by the vicissitudes of life; they no longer find much reason to smile. Until those gigantic white vehicles turn off the highway. ...

“When the trucks come, my little girl smiles. For that truck means she can finally have a ‘Buddy,’ one of those chocolate yogurts I used to buy for her, back when she still had a home. ... For us adults, it is not just the food but the people we “see” behind it. We are reminded that there are still some good people, who think of us and want to help. It warms our hearts, giving us ‘grown ups’ a reason to smile too.” (Dalia, former Elei Sinai resident)

There is much to mourn in the destruction of the 25 towns in which Jews once lived. We mourn the loss of their homes and jobs, their schools and shuls. Of families devastated and a world destroyed. Of constancy and community that has now become lives lived in limbo. Of once-proud farmers forever transformed by their reversal of fortunes. We can indeed mourn. But we can also rebuild their pride and self-respect. We can give them a reason to hope and an opportunity to rejoice. We can invite them to “join us” each time we make a *simchah*, by ensuring that when we celebrate our bar mitzvahs and weddings, they too can celebrate their family milestones. And three times a year, we can celebrate our Yamim Tovim together with our fellow Jews — the men and women who once lived in Gush Katif.

“The destruction of Gush Katif affects all of Am Israel — it is a jewel missing from the crown of Eretz Yisrael. That’s why it is so beautiful that Jews have found this way to help us — by making our *chagim* more special, they become a part of us too. My children’s dream became a nightmare. But with the help of Hashem — and organizations like Young Israel and Yad Ezra — it is becoming a dream again.” (Liat, former Shirat Hayam resident)

Sukkos 2009 Distribution Campaign

Four years ... four years of families struggling to rebuild their lives, struggling to rise above their loss — of the past they knew and the future they anticipated — for themselves and for their children. Four years of seeing hope rise and fall. ... This Shavuot, I called Rabbi Lerner and Yossi Goldberger: “Will there be a food distribution this Yom Tov?” They had no answer — They did not know yet if funds would suffice to bring a delivery this time. I pleaded, ‘Please, bring your trucks. Bring your food. Bring your hope. For without you, there will simply be no holiday here at all.’” (Rivka)

Sukkos 2009 is approaching — and that means a seven-day holiday challenge for the 1,800 Gush Katif families struggling to survive from day to day. These families need your help: to provide food for their Yom Tov tables, wine for Kiddush, treats to give their children a reason to celebrate on what should be a festival of joy.

Disengagement Figures

The Disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria was estimated to incur the following personal and financial costs:

- Loss of homes for 1,700 families, or about 8,000 people. A large proportion of the residents came as young couples and left with three generations of their families having grown up in the area.
- The closing of 42 day-care centers, 36 kindergartens, seven elementary schools, and three high schools
- The need to find new schools for 5,000 school-children
- The loss of 38 synagogues
- Loss of livelihood to 700 Israeli farmers and small-business owners.
- The exhumation of 48 graves in the Gush Katif Cemetery, including those of six residents murdered by terrorists
- A \$2 billion cost to the Israeli government, about 3.5 percent of the 2005 state budget of about \$59 billion. This is equivalent to about half the country’s annual health budget or approximately one-third of the budget for education. This includes:
 - The \$1 billion cost of family relocation.
 - The \$500 million spent by the IDF to remove military bases and equipment from the Gaza Strip.
 - The \$25 million cost of the demolition and removal of rubble from some 3,000 homes and public buildings.

Source: The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Our Sukkos Distribution Campaign is now under way. Fill these homes with food and festivity — and with the comfort of knowing that our entire nation is united as one with our fellow Jews of Gush Katif.

To donate in U.S.: Contact — National Council of Young Israel
111 John Street, Suite 450
New York, New York 10038
Tel: (212) 929-1525

Israel: Contact — Council of Young Israel
Rabbis in Israel (CYIR)
58 King George Street
Jerusalem 91371
Tel: 972-2-625-4983 x111

Donate on the web at WWW.YOUNG ISRAEL.ORG — click on DONATE and choose THE GUSH KATIF CAMPAIGN

And the next time you’re in Israel, visit the families of Nitzan: Show them you care — and see for yourself just how easy it is to make a child smile!

To arrange a visit, contact Rabbi Pesach Lerner at the National Council of Young Israel office. Tel: (212) 929-1525 or execvp@youngisrael.org

Gush Katif Agriculture

In Gush Katif’s unique hot-houses, advanced technology was used to grow bug-free leafy vegetables and herbs that answered to the strictest health, aesthetic and religious requirements. Most of the chemical-free organic agricultural products were exported to Europe. In addition, the community of Atzmona had

Israel’s largest plant nursery, and the Katif dairy, with 800 cows, was the second-largest in Israel.

The total sum of exports from the greenhouses of Gush Katif came to \$200,000,000 per year and made up 15% of the agricultural exports of the State of Israel.

The combined assets in

Gush Katif were estimated at \$23 billion.

Of Israel’s total exports abroad, Gush Katif exported:

- 95% of bug-free lettuce and greens
- 70% of organic vegetables
- 60% of cherry tomatoes
- 60% of geraniums to Europe.