



For the Sake of the Negev

The founders of Kibbutz Sa'ad didn't choose that name, but the establishment of this collective between Gaza and Beersheba in 1947 certainly aided in the Negev's inclusion in the Jewish state

Where To?

Sa'ad

Kibbutz in the western Negev



Tel Aviv teenagers in Mandate Palestine were generally too busy with high school and youth movements to do any more than fantasize about a Jewish state. The more adventurous of these youngsters joined Gadna youth battalions to prepare for membership in the Hagana defense militia or secretly distributed leaflets and posters for its Revisionist Zionist rival, the Irgun. But some couldn't wait to start realizing the Zionist dream.

One such group, affiliated with the religious-Zionist Bnei Akiva youth organization, envied the Diaspora pioneers founding settlements in the Holy Land with the help of the Religious-Kibbutz Movement. No such opportunities were offered to local Bnei Akiva

branches, and these teens felt unduly overlooked. So in 1937, they set up their own pioneer group, Alumim (Youth). They notified the Jewish colonization enterprise that they were about to begin agricultural training and suggested that the powers that be start looking for some wilderness in need of cultivation.

Get Up and Go

Alas, Alumim soon discovered at least a thousand others vying for this training, many of them refugees from Europe brought to the Holy Land by the Jewish Agency's Youth Aliya office in the dark days of prewar Nazi expansion. Arriving without family, these newcomers found a natural home within the kibbutz movement. With so much older,

stronger, and needier manpower available, there was no room for the Alumim collective anywhere.

Eventually, twenty members of the group persuaded ultra-Orthodox settlers from Kfar Gidon (in the Jezreel Valley) to let them finally get their hands dirty (in exchange for minimal wages and a pat on the back). Conditions were miserable, particularly for relatively spoiled urban youth, but they kept a stiff lip. As one of them later wrote:

8 Marheshvan, 1938. It's really crowded in the room, five beds against the wall. One corner is the dining area, whose only furniture – serving as both table and chairs – is the floor. The group comes back from work elated, each full of the miracles and wonders of his first day's labor, and meanwhile a fine tomorrow beckons. (Lippa Aharoni and Ruti Lazar, eds., *Sa'ad – One Step at a Time: Biography, Diary Excerpts, and Events Calendar Marking Forty Years Since Kibbutz Sa'ad's Establishment in the Negev* [1987], p. 4 [Hebrew])

Several months later, a few more began training in Nes Ziona. Everyone worked like a dog for pay that would have embarrassed even Arab laborers.

After a year and a half, with nothing to show but backaches



The group came back from work elated, flush with the miracles of the first day's labor

and blisters, the Alumim collective accepted an offer from Kibbutz Tirat Zvi – in the sweltering Beth She'an Valley – to take in half of those in Kfar Gidon, while the rest joined nearby Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu.

Young founders of Alumim
from Bnei Akiva's Tel Aviv
branch, 1938



The two groups met only on the Sabbath – if the Tirat Zvi workers had the energy to drag themselves uphill to the white shack between the two settlements.

Time for Tents

By 1940, fed up with working for others, both groups reunited to pursue their own initiative. Renting a plot of land, they founded Bnei Akiva's first kibbutz. Graduates of the movement from all over the country hastened to join Kibbutz Alumim. A large tent served as a dining room and synagogue, with ten smaller tents pitched around it. All the kibbutzniks needed now was a permanent home – but once again, their timing was off. With a world war in progress and Mandate Palestine in recession, they had trouble finding employment even in Netanya, let alone setting up shop somewhere new.

With little else to do, the pioneers put together an impressive roster of self-study programs, including Talmud (with eleven men learning the daily *daf*, or page), Bible, and even literature, economics,

history, Arabic, and English. After all, if you couldn't work or eat, you might as well fill in the gaps in your high school education and matriculate.

As things improved, the dining tent was replaced with a brick building, and a cow shed and chicken coop followed. There were new members too, graduates of Kfar Ha-noar Ha-dati, the religious youth village in Kfar Hasidim, in the Upper Galilee. On Lag Ba-Omer of 1942, the Alumim cohort celebrated its first wedding. Miriam and Avrahami Rosenman tied the knot joyfully but in almost total darkness, thanks to the wartime blackout.

The war's end renewed Alumim's hopes of proper premises, but with many other groups ahead of it in the pecking order, members pondered whether to stay in Netanya or seek some interim solution. The debate raged in the weekly bulletin, with the negative impact of urban bourgeois values cited as a prime reason for moving on. But there were also good reasons to stay: the alternatives weren't tempting,

In 1940, the Alumim cohort was split up, with members farming in different places. Caricature showing their various locations

Alumim's first wedding was held at the cohort's campsite in Netanya. Miriam and Avrahami Rosenman



Miriam and Avrahami Rosenman were wed in almost total darkness, thanks to the wartime blackout

and yet another relocation would be challenging.

In the end, Alumim settled temporarily in Herzliya, then a dusty pioneer colony seeking able hands to maintain existing orchards and plant new ones. In lieu of wages, the kibbutz members were offered ten local plots, which – as good socialists uninterested in real estate – they turned down. This land later became Israel's most exclusive beachfront community, Herzliya Pituah.

Exchanging Leah for Rachel

The years ticked by, and still no suitably idealistic opportunity

presented itself to Kibbutz Alumim. The Religious-Kibbutz Movement proposed a merger with Kibbutz Tirat Zvi, but this option fell short of the young pioneers' utopian vision. As stated in their newsletter in 1942:

Inasmuch as those in Tirat Zvi are satisfied with setting up a farm run by religious workers in a pioneering location like the Beth She'an Valley – ignoring the goals of creating a new, ideal society, character refinement, and so forth – we can't join them. We still hope to achieve



Unworkable solution. Kibbutz members arrive at their designated plot in Hazal'e, 1947



On Monday, 12 Tammuz, 1947, the members of Alumim finally set foot on its permanent site. Reading the Torah, Morse-code signaling from the stockade tower, and (facing page) a flag proudly waving, all on that day

Overnight, three sheds went up along with a water tower, latrines, a shower, and a fence. By dawn, there was a settlement

these things and won't be denied such aspirations. (ibid., p. 16)

The people of Alumim spent years living according to this exacting model, preaching its virtues to the next generation of Bnei Akiva in Herzliya, and absorbing survivors of the terrors in Europe. Meanwhile, couples married, and children were born.

Finally, after incessant nagging, the kibbutz movement found Alumim a parcel of desolate land in Hazal'e, south of Beersheba. There wasn't even a parched Bedouin camel in sight; the area was so dry that nothing ever grew, no matter

how much it was watered. But the members of Kibbutz Alumim were undaunted.

Ten men and one woman arrived in Hazal'e on Tu Bi-Shevat, February 5, 1947, only to discover that

[...] a settlement group was already there, from the moshav movement. They'd also been promised land in Hazal'e. They wanted us to leave, and we thought they should be the ones to go. [...] A few days later, a decision was made: We were staying put. Two or three months went by, and it became clear that the place was no good for





agriculture [...]. We went back to Herzliya. We'd waited seven years [like the biblical Jacob], and all we got was Leah. (Dudu Dayan, *Making a State* [Ministry of Defense, 1992], p. 36 [Hebrew])

Luckily, Kibbutz Alumim was spared another seven-year wait, and "Rachel" soon turned up in the shape of a northern Negev site named Tual. Volatile Gaza was just a few kilometers away, but the kibbutzniks were undeterred.

That summer, twenty-four men and women jubilantly set out for their new home. Warmly welcomed by the nearby religious kibbutz of Be'erot Yitzhak, they

A bitter pill for the youthful pioneers. Government document renaming the kibbutz Sa'ad

got straight to work, teaming up with dozens of experienced laborers to erect an entire settlement overnight. Why the rush? According to a Turkish bylaw still enforced by the British, once the roofs were in place, no demolition order could be issued.

We left at nightfall, with an almost full moon in the sky. We drove until the convoy stopped: here. We held our breath. This was it. A seven-year dream come true.

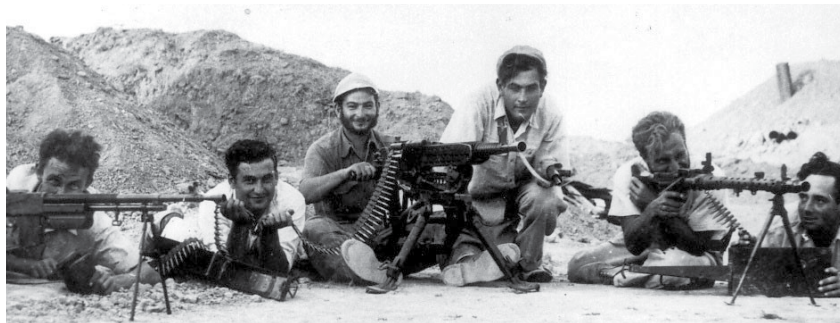
In one night, as we scurried about like ants, three sheds went up, a water tower, latrines, and a shower. A fence was erected all around the spot. By dawn, a settlement was in place. We kept working the whole day to get it all done.





A British van appeared on the horizon, kicking up clouds of dust visible for miles. [The British] saw the roofs, they saw the fence, and there was nothing they could do but add another name to the map. (ibid., p. 37)

Yet that name wasn't Alumim. Instead, some settlement bigwig had chosen Sa'ad – meaning “aid,” since the collective was bringing just that to the Negev. No one in Alumim was happy, especially as Sa'ad was also the name of the government



welfare office. Three years later, in 1950, kibbutz members were still complaining of being mistaken for social workers, and the whole thing had become a local joke.

Instant border settlement. Kibbutz Sa'ad was issued weapons for self-defense. Guard duty, 1947

A concrete security shelter was Sa'ad's first building. Under construction in 1947, with protective sand barricades in the foreground, and the bullet-scarred structure today, housing the “Stronghold Facing Gaza” Museum

Loud shelling from Egypt made some kibbutz members wonder if perhaps a Jewish state had been declared after all



Photo: Danny Gershoni



After 1948, Kibbutz Sa'ad prospered. Its celebrated cowshed, 1952

Photo: Yehezkel Zohar, Sa'ad Archive

Sa'ad's band in action

Courtesy of Yehuda Bart

On the Front Lines

At first, the women and children of Alumim had to remain in Herzliya until security and other conditions improved. Married members saw their families only every three weeks; others waited months for a respite of their own.

The only public transport was the bus from Tel Aviv to Gaza, followed by a mule-drawn cart to the kibbutz. All building materials also came through Gaza, including concrete for the security shelter every border community required.

Despite these difficulties, the kibbutzniks would probably have managed with their usual grit and hard work, if not for November 29, 1947, when the UN voted to partition Palestine. Arab attacks began

By the By

→ Right from the start, Kibbutz Sa'ad produced an internal newsletter, including everything from kitchen work schedules to musings on the weekly Torah reading and inside jokes. Originally posted on the notice board outside the dining tent, the publication continues to this day, although the kibbutz has long since privatized, and everyone receives his own digital newsletter by e-mail.

→ On Purim of 1960, six kibbutz members put on such a successful show – complete with accordion accompaniment – that there were calls for repeat performances. The resulting Sa'ad band subsequently played hundreds of gigs nationwide, including one in Kibbutz Geva (in the Jezreel Valley) in exchange for a concert by the kibbutz's own celebrated ensemble, the Givatron.





immediately, sparking Israel's War of Independence. The Tel Aviv–Gaza bus was cancelled, electricity was cut off, and water pipes were constantly sabotaged. Subterranean shelters had to be dug out and fortified with construction materials hauled in from afar. Daily life was lived mostly under siege and underground. One wife stuck in Herzliya wrote:

We saw our husbands roughly once every three months. Children who cried “Daddy, Daddy” all the time refused to go near [their fathers], because they barely knew them. When I gave birth, I asked for my husband to come help me for a few weeks, but he got only three days’ leave. (ibid., p. 36)

The defenders of Sa’ad spent their days hiding in trenches and bunkers. Farming was carried out at night, when incoming shells could be detected shining through the darkness, giving those exposed a few seconds to run for cover. In one face-to-face attack, the Arabs fled, leaving behind a jeep and rifle. The vehicle was stashed in Be’erot Yitzhak, and the firearm was used to protect Sa’ad. The next day, a British officer demanded both:

The officer said, “Listen! There are Arab Legion armored cars



Farming went on at night, when incoming shells could be seen in the darkness, giving workers time to run

on the road and a raging mob. If you hand over the Browning, I can persuade them to leave, but if you don't – in the end, the Arabs will bust their way in and take the Browning anyway.”

“Fine,” we replied [...].

The men went out to the road and saw no indication of either

Childcare on Kibbutz Sa'ad, 1952. Today's residents include the great-grandchildren of Alumim's founders

Legionaries' cars or "raging mobs."
(ibid., p. 27)

Make Way for the Women

Kibbutz Sa'ad was so cut off from the rest of the country that on 5 Iyar, 1948, no one knew Israel had declared independence. Only particularly loud shelling from Egypt made some kibbutzniks wonder if perhaps a Jewish state had been founded after all, with the barrage being their southern neighbor's friendly response.

The shelling basically wiped out Be'erot Yitzhak, and Sa'ad's daily chores were relegated to bomb shelters. Men left these safe spaces only to take turns guarding, together with a few army reinforcements. Water was rationed, as no one knew when the pipes could be repaired. Hygiene was limited to hands and face, cups went unwashed, and no shaving was allowed.

When the war ended, the families of Sa'ad were finally reunited. Its buildings were damaged beyond habitation, so the entire kibbutz relocated to the next hill, known as Upper Sa'ad. (Lower Sa'ad became a memorial to the struggle for independence.) Twenty-nine couples settled in with their thirty-one children, along with thirty singles, including only seven women – an imbalance soon rectified.

Burying the Hatchet?

Seventy-five years on, Kibbutz Sa'ad's deliberations could have been written yesterday

Rosh Hashana eve, 1948

Now is no time for summations. Let's postpone the discussion of this past year, as we have nothing to conclude but this: We're in the midst of a long, difficult struggle for our very survival, for the state, for the Negev, and for our own little Sa'ad. This struggle has already cost us precious sacrifices of lives and property. So far, both our members at the front and our families in Herzliya have stood the test. Our spirit is strong, and great is our hope that peace will come speedily and bring complete victory.

Nevertheless, the heart fails at the thought that when peace comes, on the day the tension ceases, will all those who were with us before join us, united, to build and create? Will we all be able to wash away the bitterness that has built up amid the harsh living conditions and the alienation of one camp from the other? (Alumim newsletter, October 1948)



In 1966, another long-standing grievance was redressed when Bnei Akiva set up a kibbutz across the road, on land vacated by Be'erot Yitzhak (which had moved north after the War of Independence). The new kibbutz's name? Alumim. ■



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