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Israel

Eilat hit

Israel deals with first suicide bombing in nine months

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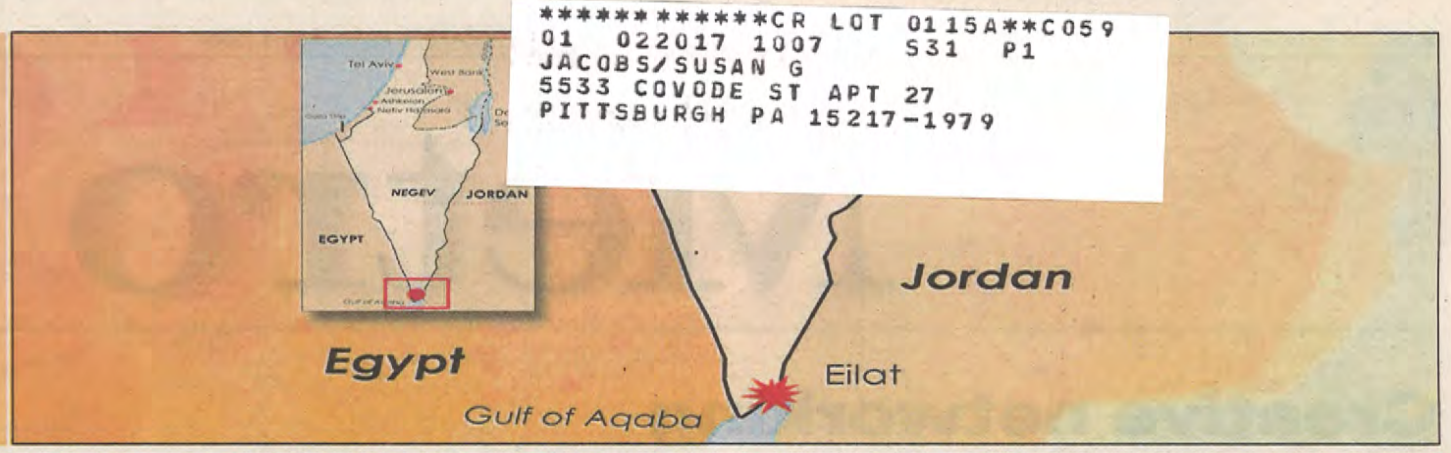

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New year for trees

Getty Images

Tu B'Shevat, the new year for trees, falls on Saturday, Feb. 3 (15 Shevat). In recent years, the holiday has become the Jewish version of Earth Day, as Jews celebrate the natural resources of the planet and use the holiday to promote environmentalism. One way to do so is to plant trees, which helps offset the CO2 gases that contribute to global warming. ***See story, page 25.***

Pittsburghers reacting quietly to Katsav scandal

By Jo Marks Rifkin
Staff Writer

Radio talk show host Lynn Cullen receives myriad calls involving politicians.

"Fortunately," Cullen said, "no one's discussing the rape charges brought against Israeli President Moshe Katsav."

Numerous leaders in Pittsburgh's Jewish community concurred with Cullen — the less publicity the Israeli president receives, the better. The situation, they all agreed, is not one for speculation, but one that will be resolved in Israel's courts.

A married father of five, Katsav, 61, faces the prospect of an indictment including charges of rape and sexual harassment against four former female employees, in addition to charges of fraud and breach of trust.

Katsav took a leave of absence from his position on Jan. 25 as lawmakers

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U.N. remembers Shoah

Mark Garten/UN photo

A Jewish high school choir sings during the annual United Nations event in remembrance of victims of the Holocaust, Monday, Jan. 29, at U.N. headquarters. ***See story, page 26.***

Efforts afoot to develop the Negev

By Susan Jacobs
Associate Editor

When the first Zionists returned to the land of Israel more than a 100 years ago, they dreamed of "making the desert bloom."

Today, once barren hillsides are covered with trees, agriculture in the land is flourishing and the Jewish state is home to more Jews than any other country in the world.

But there is still much uncultivated desert in Israel.

While Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa are densely populated, the Negev Desert — which takes up 60 percent of the country's land mass — is home to only about 8 percent of Israel's total population.

"Virtually no one is living there," said Rick Krosnick, Midwest zone director for the Jewish National Fund.

In an effort to create new living spaces in Israel, new communities are being built in the Negev, and plans are in place to build many more.

The Jewish National Fund/Keren Keyemeth LeIsrael is working with the Israeli government on a plan to create 25 new communities in the Negev over the next 10 years. The plan has been dubbed Blueprint Negev.

The creation of new cities and towns would ease the population strain on the center of Israel and also establish a strong Jewish presence in the Negev.

The cities of Be'er Sheba and Eilat are the northern and southern outposts of Jewish settlement in the Negev, but there are a handful of sizeable towns and villages in between. The development towns of Ofaqim and Yerucham were created in the early years of the Jewish state to serve the needs of emigrants from North Africa. However, because the communities were isolated from other Israeli cities, they never attracted ad-

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Times To Remember

Kindle Sabbath candles: 5:20 p.m. EST.
Sabbath ends: 6:22 p.m. EST.

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Negev: Development is essential to Israel's future

Continued from page 1.

ditional development and, instead of helping their residents to become upwardly mobile, they have perpetuated the cycle of poverty.

"[Negev development] always failed in the past, because it's been treated as a social welfare project," said Krosnick.

He said Blueprint Negev is different.

The project is intended to create communities that are desirable living places for people of all incomes and levels of education, with good schools and high paying jobs.

"The hardest part is getting people to go," said Krosnick.

But momentum is picking up, as the first of the new Negev communities are being built near Be'er Sheba.

Blueprint Negev, in conjunction with a group called Or, has developed a database of people who are willing to make the move, and has a separate list of some 500 job openings in the region, including desirable technology and health care jobs.

"It's about making matches," said Krosnick. "It has to happen all at the same time."

Seven new communities are already under construction, and some families have moved into temporary housing in the Negev until their new homes are ready.

It can work, JNF leaders say, noting that Phoenix, transformed itself from a small desert city to a booming metropolis. Part of its success was due to public-private partnerships, similar to those at work in Blueprint Negev.

Of course, in the Negev, as in all of Israel, water is a scarce commodity.

However, Krosnick said the country began using water more efficiently in the early 1990s, when emigrants from the former Soviet Union were coming into Israel in large numbers. By capturing rain water in reservoirs and recycling waste water, Israel saved more fresh water for drinking.

Now, fossilized ground water and waste water are used for agriculture and industry, and a desalination plant in Ashkelon, which is under construction, is expected to dramatically increase the amount of potable water.

Creative use of water has made it possible to create fish farms in the desert, and plans for a revitalized Be'er Sheba include reviving a dry stream bed by feeding it with water from reservoirs and creating an 11-kilometer river walk business/entertainment district alongside it.

"This will spur development like nothing else has," said Scott Gendell, a member of the national JNF board who is also a real estate developer.

Be'er Sheba, often called the capital of the Negev, is to be the hub of the first phase of Blueprint Negev.

Eilat and Mizpeh Ramon will serve as hubs for later phases of Negev development.

In all, Blueprint Negev is intended to bring some 250,000 new residents to the Negev in the next decade. Some of those residents will be native Israelis relocating from other communities, but others will be new immigrants, including North Americans. Due in part to the efforts of the aliyah organization Nefesh B'Nefesh, an average of 3,000 North Americans move to Israel each year.

"Some of those people may be interested in the Negev," said Krosnick.

On the ground, the changes in the Negev are starting to be noticeable.

"New communities are growing out of the desert," said Gendell. "You drive along and there's desert, desert, desert and then all of a sudden you see a community and all sorts of young people."

The new towns are being built in styles and with materials that are suited to the desert climate.

"You have to build a town that looks like a Negev town, that embraces the environment," said Krosnick.

Building in the Negev is fraught with challenges, but JNF leaders believe that this plan is essential to the future of Israel.

"No one is giving the Jews more land," said Julie Paris, regional JNF director in Pittsburgh.

That means that sparsely populated areas, such as the Negev and the Galilee, must be developed.

"We're ensuring we do have a safe and secure Israel," said Paris.

(Susan Jacobs can be reached at sjacobs@pittchron.com.)

Katsav: Israeli democracy works

Continued from page 1.

began impeachment proceedings against him. The speaker of the Knesset, Dalia Itzik, is performing Katsav's ceremonial duties.

"The American Jewish Committee has complete confidence in the democratic form of government in Israel, and, because of that, they will do the right thing," said Lisa Steindel, AJC-Pittsburgh's executive director.

Rabbi Alvin K. Berkun agreed.

"I want to allow the legal system to work this thing through," said Berkun, rabbi emeritus of Tree of Life Congregation and current president of the Rabbinical Assembly.

While several leaders of Jewish Pittsburgh said they could not comment on the situation, many did address the allegations against Katsav with an optimistic twist.

"It is admirable that Israel, like the United States, will hold its leaders accountable," said Pittsburgh attorney David H. Ehrenwerth.

"The democratic process in Israel should be praised," he continued, noting that other countries in the area are not given carte blanche to investigate their rulers.

"They'd have their heads blown off," Ehrenwerth said.

State Rep. Dan Frankel, D-Squirrel Hill, compared the situation to Watergate.

"It was a proud moment in American history with America showing the world that the country could cleanse itself," Frankel said, while noting that Israel is doing the same.

Although politics is not immune from bad actors who abuse power, Frankel noted that the democratic system in Israel works.

"The judicial community and the country are still running," he said. "There was no coup. The president of Israel doesn't need personal security forces. And there are no riots in the streets," he said.

"Democracy in Israel is strong, vibrant and self-correcting and I hope that the rest of the world takes notice of that action," Frankel said. "There are very few places in the world where that can happen."

As for the people who hate Israel, Frankel said they are going to use the slew of recent government corruption scandals and a president facing a rape indictment to their advantage.

Rabbis Daniel Schiff and Yisroel Miller said Katsav should resign from the post.

"Jewish leadership needs to be beyond reproach," said Schiff, the community scholar at the Agency for Jewish Learning and spiritual leader of Temple B'nai Israel in White Oak.

Miller had similar sentiments.

"Israel was designed to be an exemplary state," he said. "It really needs to have leaders who demonstrate the finest in society and the finest Jewish standard which the Torah calls for."

Miller, spiritual leader of Poale Zedeck Congregation, said he hoped that Katsav would be acquitted, but he thought "it would be in everyone's interest if he would step down for the duration."

As for Israel's image, "the most important thing in the world of public relations is to tell the truth," said Saul Markowitz, president of Markowitz Communications.

"It's best to get it out in the open now and go through the whole process," he said. "The worst thing you can do is hide or lie."

(Jo Marks Rifkin can be reached at jrifkin@pittchron.com.)

Speedsitting: Brings students and families together

Continued from page 2.

"Several Speedsitters from November did not interview in January," Oz said, "because they have already secured regular baby sitting duties with one or more local families."

Karla Leite, an injured University of Pittsburgh swimmer, has experience with kids from teaching swim lessons and is looking to extend to baby sitting. She and the Werners discussed a regular job for a few hours every now and then, while Natalie Bloch, an Israeli visiting for six months, considered moving in with the family.

"In addition to meeting its most immediate objective — helping local parents find baby sitters who have specific qualifications — Speedsitting has brought together two large and distinct segments of Pittsburgh's Jewish community: young families and university students," Oz said. "This connection will positively impact our city in the short-run and long term."

Another Speedsitting is being planned and will probably take place early this fall.

(Meredith Mishkin can be reached at mlm79+@pitt.edu.)

A powerful connection.

JEWISH ASSOCIATION ON AGING

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