

## KIBBUTZ LOTAN: A PEARL IN THE ARAVA

by

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Nothing could surely be further from the lush mountains of Kiwi pioneerism than Kibbutz Lotan - a new agricultural village in Israel's Arid Arava region. Founded some two years ago by the Movement for Progressive Judaism, Kibbutz Lotan has become the 18th farming community in 20 years to be grafted into an area once dismissed as a saline wasteland trailing the Jordanian border — Israel's longest with an Arab neighbour.

Today, however, the Arava is a showcase of successful desert agriculture where abundant quantities of winter-grown vegetables are being produced with advanced technology to further Israel's agricultural exports drive.

Through the Jewish National Fund of New Zealand, the tyranny of wilderness has now been abolished by a commitment to sponsor land reclamation for Kibbutz Lotan. This is to include the creation of farmland and infrastructure for housing and industry, as well as tree plantings to protect the village from the extremes of climate in an area some 200 metres below sea level.

Development of Kibbutz Lotan is an exhilarating departure from JNF -New Zealand's traditional cooperation with JNF-Australia, which has helped to green Israel's bare hills — notably at Kerem Maharal, near Haifa. Despite its small Jewish community, though, JNF-New Zealand is confident of raising the necessary funds to promote Lotan as its pearl in the Arava.

Lotan's young community is also a successful model for immigrant absorption, similar to nearby Kibbutz Ketoura which was created a decade ago. American singles form the majority of the community, though other English-speaking university-trained people have also joined the kibbutz. Several garinim (nucleus groups) of Israeli high school graduates have also decided to make the kibbutz their home, and they are currently living there in the context of Nahal, an IDF program which combines military service with pioneering activity.

Kibbutz Lotan recently moved to its permanent site near Kibbutz Yahel, also founded by the Movement for Progressive Judaism, several years ago. Lotan's founders lived at Kibbutz Yotvata until this March, where they tendered a five-acre plot of tomatoes. At Lotan, they have a 50-acre date plantation at their disposal for irrigated crops, especially suited to the high saline content of the Arava's underground water resources.

According to Redge Harman, a young oleh from the United States, Kibbutz Lotan wants to synthesize Judaism with modern secular life. "Our kibbutz is based on traditional mitzvot (laws). We keep Kashrut (the orthodox Jewish dietary laws) in the dining room, and we celebrate the traditional Friday evening service and all religious holidays. People can observe them, though, as they see fit." Harman visualizes Lotan as an intellectually inquisitive community where religious observance is casual and open to rational discussion.

Building has been completed for 40 singles' apartments and several larger, family apartments, a dining room and kibbutz offices. Meanwhile, work has commenced on the construction of an infirmary, to be staffed by trained nurses, and plans also exist for a dental clinic.

Future plans include the establishment of a progressive Jewish elementary school for the children of Lotan and neighbouring Yahel. Harman would also like a certified Progressive Rabbi to officiate at weddings and to administer the community's other religious needs. But this, he says, obviously depends upon the agreement of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate.

Kibbutz Lotan has reached a major landmark. With inauguration day already behind it, the pioneering community has its eyes riveted on future growth and development.

March 3, 1983