

## The Redeemers of the Land

by Naftali Greenwood

*"The land shall not be sold forever for the land is Mine" (Lev. 25:23)*

*"Redemption of the Land" in modern times is the purchase, reclamation and settlement of land in Eretz Israel by the Jewish National Fund, by private individuals and organizations and later by the State of Israel.*

### The Late Ottoman Period: Redemption Begins and Consolidates

Redemption of land in Eretz Israel, much of which had fallen into neglect under foreign rule, began in the mid-1850s with the first attempts to enable Jews to live productively in Ottoman Palestine without reliance on the "old *yishuv*" model of overseas support. Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) made the first known land purchase: 10 hectares (1 hectare=2.5 acres) of orange groves in Jaffa (1855). Other private acquisitions followed, and by 1882, some 2,200 hectares had been purchased by Jews.

Although several of the first Zionist villages (*moshavot*) were built on this land, the areas were not contiguous and the idea of using land purchase to prepare for Jewish sovereignty was far in the future. Each purchase entailed a cumbersome bureaucratic procedure vis-a-vis the local Turkish authorities, which, in the final declining phase of the Ottoman Empire, were either hostile to or uninterested in Jewish holdings in the sparsely populated backwater province that Palestine had become. Nearly all land was owned by the state (and was passed on to subsequent sovereigns) or by private and public entities through title or leasing arrangements. This state of affairs, coupled with the frequent need to resort to bribery in official dealings, gave the Jewish purchases a clandestine complexion that would recur in subsequent years.

The second enduring aspect of land redemption, reclamation, reflected the effects of protracted environmental neglect in Palestine. Reclamation - itself a time-honored practice, as evident in the ancient terraces visible on the hillsides, dates from the late nineteenth century: draining of swamps, clearing of stones, terrace creation and repair were all undertaken. Throughout, the main motive has been to prevent topsoil erosion. The third facet of land redemption, economically viable settlement, followed as a matter of course.

The first wave of Zionist settlement in Palestine (the "First Aliya" - 1882-1903) was typified by young pioneers from Europe who brought neither capital nor experience for agricultural settlement. Their economic enterprises were unviable until they were rescued by the Hibbat Zion movement, which called on Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896) for financial assistance. Although Hirsch's efforts in Jewish agricultural resettlement focused on ventures in other countries, the First Aliya enterprise in Palestine was consistent with his prescriptions for enhancing the Jewish condition,

and his Jewish Colonization Association (ICA, est. 1891) became an important player in land redemption after his death.

Baron Benjamin (Edmond James) de Rothschild (1845-1934) enlisted in this cause after being petitioned by the leaders of Rishon Lezion, one of the First Aliya villages. His patronage embraced 12 settlements at all three levels of land redemption: purchase, reclamation and economically viable settlement. To make these possible, he established an administration that, although staffed in part by condescending officials who evoked the independent-minded settlers' resentment, institutionalized all three aspects of land redemption. The best-known settlements sponsored by Rothschild are Metulla, Zikhron Ya'akov, Rishon Lezion, and Rosh Pina. Metulla (est. 1896) is an example of a purchase that had the further advantages of controlling water sources and establishing the northern limit of Jewish settlement.

In 1900, Rothschild transferred the settlements, their agricultural enterprises, and 25,000 hectares of land to the ICA, which he continued to support in various ways. During this period, the newly formed Zionist Organization embarked on the same land-redemption model: purchase, reclamation and settlement. For this purpose, it established two central agencies. First was the Jewish National Fund (JNF), or Keren Kayemeth Lelsrael in Hebrew, founded on December 29, 1901, whose charter specified land purchase in Eretz Israel - redemption of the land - as the organization's sole pursuit. In its first decade, the JNF built a worldwide fundraising organization based on sale of stamps, collection boxes in homes and schools and solicitation of donations. Its first modest purchases were made in 1904 and 1908 in Lower Galilee, Judea, and the Lake Kinneret region, and two forms of settlement that would prove crucial in the land-acquisition enterprise were pioneered there: the cooperative (*moshav*) and the collective (*kevutza*, later *kibbutz*).

The second redemption agency founded by the Zionist Organization was the Palestine Land Development Company (PLDP), established in 1908 by Otto Warburg and Arthur Ruppin to purchase land for the JNF. Subsequently, an overseas fundraising mechanism known as Keren Hayesod was also established. Ruppin, more than any other individual, consolidated the institutional side of the settlement effort through his personal experience and professional training - a passion for sound administration, acquaintance with diverse Diaspora communities and studies in law and economics. Ruppin committed the Zionist Organization to the settlement venture, helped devise the collective and cooperative forms that made it sustainable, and elevated the farmers to equal status in the settlement enterprise, something the Rothschild administrators had not done. In urban development, his efforts were cardinal in the founding of Tel Aviv and the purchase of land in Haifa and Jerusalem, where neighborhoods were established.

In its first years of activity, the Zionist Organization focused on placing Jewish immigrants in agricultural settlements. Because few such immigrants had agricultural training, Ruppin initiated the establishment of a series of training facilities, known as "National Farms," on JNF land. Alumni of this training settled as lessees in other JNF-sponsored localities, including the original villages. Most importantly, however, the farms served as incubators for the philosophies and practices of various kinds of rural settlement.

Thus the land-redemption model had consolidated by the time British rule came into effect (1920). It was institutional as distinct from entrepreneurial (although its leading

figures thought entrepreneurially), and increasingly rural as against urban. Nearly all of the settlers were lessors, not owners, of their land.

### **The British Mandate Period (1920-1948)**

The British Mandate restored the governmental stability that had been disrupted by World War I and augured, under the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a regime initially sympathetic to Zionist aims. It also made other parts of the country available for redemption: the Negev, Transjordan and the Golan Heights.

The Jewish institutional redeemers continued to work with increased vigor, both on rural land acquisition and urban settlement. Examples of urban projects are the "garden neighborhoods" of Jerusalem, the Allenby Street area in Tel Aviv, several neighborhoods in Haifa and various localities on the coastal plain.

Baron Edmond de Rothschild re-entered the field in 1923 by founding the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA), which carried on his work under his son, James Armand de Rothschild (1878-1957). By 1930, PICA had amassed 5,200 hectares in various parts of the country, on which it established 50 settlements that reflected the diverse models that had evolved by this time: villages (such as Pardess Hanna, Binyamina and Givat Ada, all named for members of the Rothschild family), kibbutzim, moshavim and urban localities such as Bnei Brak and Herzliya. PICA continued to assist rural settlements as well as developing or financing economic enterprises, including some of lasting importance in the Israeli economy - wineries, the Potash Company, the Electric Company and Neshar Cement, to name only a few. By the end of the Mandate (1948), the PICA possessed a large proportion of the Jewish-owned land in Palestine.

The second phase in land redemption, reclamation, became crucial during the Mandate period, because much of the available territory was in marshy valleys. Thus, PICA began to drain swamps, turning over the land to existing or newly founded rural settlements there. In 1934, a 5,600-hectare concession was acquired, from two Arab families in Syria, to drain and settle the Huleh Valley in the eastern Upper Galilee "panhandle." The JNF, by purchasing additional land in the northern Huleh Valley, achieved virtual contiguity between Metulla and Rosh Pina.

The JNF, through the PLDC, purchased more than 70,000 hectares during the Mandate period, chiefly in the valleys - Jezreel, Zebulun, Jordan, Beit Shean, Huleh and Hefer - in the Haifa bay area and in the northern Negev. Menachem Ussishkin, a Zionist leader from the very inception of Zionism, was instrumental in urging the Zionist Organization to concentrate wholeheartedly on land purchase and settlement in the Land of Israel. He urged Hovevei Zion, in 1912, to allocate funds for the purchase of land on Mount Scopus for a university in Jerusalem. As president of the JNF between 1923 and 1941, he devoted himself to the aim of acquiring land as the property of the nation. He made trips to Europe and Canada to raise funds and undertook difficult negotiations to acquire large tracts of land for the JNF. During his tenure, he increased the possessions of the JNF 25-fold. Yehoshua Hankin (1864-1945), the driving force of the PLDC, was another personage active in this endeavor. By dint of personal efforts beginning in 1890, he secured the land on which Rehovot,

Hadera, and the ICA settlements in the Galilee and elsewhere were built, as well as most of the Jezreel Valley - 60,000 hectares in all. Austere and rabbinical in appearance, Hankin interacted with Arab effendis, foreigners and miscellaneous authorities with quiet entrepreneurial audacity; his accomplishments are still taught in Israeli schools. In 1927, he presented the Zionist leadership with a 20-year plan for land acquisition, and five years later became director of the PLDC.

Private redeemers also made their appearance at this time. One such agency, the American Zion Commonwealth Company, bought the land in the Jezreel Valley on which Afula was founded. Private capital elicited vigorous expansion of citrus plantations on the coastal plain and sustained the establishment of a string of villages there. As time passed, a distinction took shape (with exceptions on either side): private imported capital gravitated to the urban sector; Jewish national capital funded pioneering rural settlement.

As the Zionist movement consolidated its intentions, which became clear to the non-Jewish inhabitants of the country, these activities met with increasing obstacles. The first was economic, as Arabs who had but recently acquired their estates caused the price of land in the country to skyrocket. The best state land in the Beit She'an Valley (near the Jordan River south of Tiberias), for example, was distributed by the Mandate government in the early 1920s to Bedouin, who did not know what to do with it. The Arab owners of the Huleh Valley concession area, who lived in Syria, had acquired the area, most of which was swampy if not altogether inundated, from the Turkish Sultan in 1914. Both sold their holdings to Jews at an exorbitant profit.

From the redeemers' standpoint, land prices were less important, as long as the funds were available, for redemption had additional goals by now. Politically, the Zionist aims in Palestine began to coalesce in the direction of statehood, and Arab anti-Jewish riots placed isolated settlements in physical jeopardy. For both reasons, acquisitions had to be as contiguous as possible. Indeed, JNF purchases of the Hefer Plain in the late 1920s created virtual contiguity in the coastal area from south of Rehovot to Haifa. By 1929, an almost uninterrupted chain of towns and villages stretched from Metulla in the north to Be'er Tuvia in the south. Additional villages and collective/ cooperative settlements filled out the area in the 1930s. Purchases that controlled water sources had high priority.

As the Mandate period progressed and the commitment to eventual statehood solidified, the third phase of land redemption, settlement, became a factor in determining the future state's boundaries. Thus, purchases were extensive in the marshy, malarial coastal plain and inland valleys and less so in the upland areas of Judea and Samaria. Several purchases and settlement ventures were carried out on the Golan Heights, without lasting success. Almost no transactions had been made in Transjordan, which was originally part of the British Mandate. Often, the determining factors for purchase were the sheer availability and affordability of land.

As the Mandate period went on, obstacles to the land redemption effort began to appear. The first impediments followed the 1929 Arab riots, when Arab political leaders pressured their co-nationals to desist from land transactions with the Jews, from which they had been profiting handsomely. In the wake of more extensive Arab disturbances (1936-1939), the Peel Commission partition proposal (July 1937) and the 1939 "White Paper," partitioning of the country became an imminent possibility

and the Jewish community and the Zionist movement geared up for statehood. Under these circumstances, land purchase became clandestine, as it had been under the Turks. Regulations under the White Paper policy (Feb. 1940) partitioned the country into three zones: Area A (the Judean and Samarian hills, the Western Galilee, and the Northern Negev), where sales to Jews were banned altogether; Area B (Jezreel Valley, the Eastern Galilee, and most of coastal plain), where sales might continue with approval of the High Commissioner; and Area C (the coastal strip, from Zikhron Ya'akov to a point north of Rehovot, plus the urban areas - corresponding roughly with the Peel Commission partition boundaries), where no restrictions were in effect. To circumvent the rules, the land-redemption agencies established approximately 50 new localities in previously unsettled rural areas by erecting, overnight, settlements which included a stockade and a watchtower. A crucial step in securing the inclusion of the Negev in the Jewish state was the formation of 11 such settlements in this area on October 15, 1946, and another 7 in 1947.

By May 1948, when the Mandate expired and Israel was about to proclaim its statehood, land redemption had placed nearly one-tenth of the country under Jewish ownership, the rest being owned by the government or by Arabs. Reclamation efforts had eliminated most marshes, with the exception of those in the Huleh Valley, and allowed Jewish agriculture to thrive as it had not since the Roman era. The country had 277 Jewish rural settlements - 15 villages (another 30 had become urban in the meantime), 99 moshavim, 159 kibbutzim, and 4 others. Their 111,000 inhabitants accounted for nearly 20 percent of the total Jewish population.

### **Statehood: New Meanings of Land Redemption**

The War of Independence confirmed the role of land redemption in the retention of physical control of land area. Attacks in continuously settled areas were repulsed while several isolated settlements had to be evacuated or were destroyed.

The acquisition by Israel of "state land" transformed the nature and purposes of land redemption. Purchases meant to secure physical control became largely passe; reclamation and settlement, no longer politically or militarily constrained, gathered momentum. Some of the pre-statehood settlement agencies gave way to government bodies; the rest focused on new functions. PICA transferred 12,000 hectares to the JNF and the rest of its holdings to the state, which leased some to the farmers in the villages PICA had once sponsored. James de Rothschild bequeathed all of its other assets to the state. The PLDC, newly renamed the Israel Land Development Corporation, stopped buying land in 1954 and has focused since then on development, building, and readying land for use. In the Huleh Valley, JNF carried out the 6,000-hectare reclamation project in 1951-1958.

In 1960, the Israel Lands Authority was created to manage state land plus the 80,000 hectares owned by the JNF. The Israel Lands Authority Law, passed in the same year, lays down the principle that state and JNF lands shall not be sold, but remain in perpetuity a possession of the State of Israel. Thus, by 1968, state agencies held 92% of the country's area.

The state, in conjunction with the JNF and the Jewish Agency/World Zionist Organization, continued to build rural settlements, some for new immigrants. Another 439 were established between 1948 and 1970. Nearly three-fourths of the new settlements were moshavim; this cooperative form of settlement partially eclipsed the kibbutz way of life. The historical defense goal in land redemption metamorphosed into a new purpose: by filling the periphery, Israel intended, among other things, to avert challenges to its sovereignty there. A new, state-sponsored settlement agency appeared: the Nahal corps of the Israel Defense Forces, which established many border settlements as military outposts which later became civilian settlements.

The reclamation motif in land redemption rose to primacy. The Huleh project brought the total marshland reclaimed to nearly 100,000 hectares, approximately one-fourth of cultivated land within the 1949 armistice lines. Anti-desertification efforts, launched intensively after the War of Independence and pursued to the present day, have given Israel a worldwide reputation. Saline soil (prevalent in the Negev and the Arava Valley) has been reclaimed by means of leaching. This effort, along with irrigation, using the National Water Carrier, has been so effective that the current Israeli generation thinks of Be'er Sheva as being situated on the edge, not in the middle, of the desert.

Another important form of land redemption is afforestation. Initiated by the JNF in 1908, its purposes are many: landscape enhancement, stanching of erosion and protection of selected areas from encroachments such as urbanization. (As discovered later, it also causes rainfall enhancement.) Of 83,600 hectares of forest area in Israel in 1995, 48,600 - from the Upper Galilee to the Northern Negev - were painstakingly planted in what has become a phenomenon of environmental consciousness.

In these two senses, swamp draining and afforestation, modern environmental thinking has enriched land redemption with a new concept: revitalization. The Huleh Valley draining, once completed, was found to be problematic as newly dried underground peat deposits ignited into smoldering fires that defied all extinguishers' efforts and rendered much of the area unsuitable for cultivation. Therefore, part of the valley was reflooded in 1995 and annexed to an existing nature reserve. In afforestation, the aging eucalyptus trees used in marsh control are gradually dying off, and the pines preferred by the early afforesters for their scenic value have proved less than optimal in Israel's climate, tending to burn easily. Thus, some of the older forests are being replanted with a more diverse mix that approximates the country's indigenous flora.

Of the institutions that turned land redemption from a Biblical-sounding slogan to a reality, one remains large and influential: the Jewish National Fund. Now in its tenth decade, it has evolved into Israel's largest land-development agency, with leading roles in afforestation, development of land and agricultural and environmental R&D. It attracts roughly \$100 million per year in donations as well as \$600 million per year in revenues of the Israel Lands Authority. It continues to carry out its original mission: perpetuation of Jewish national ownership of land in the Jewish national home.