



Celebrating in solitude

*While Jews around the world celebrate their freedom,
many will encounter a very different kind of holiday this year*

Create your own exodus in the Negev desert

*A tiyyul to Israel's South, even if it must necessarily
be a virtual one, can help recall our ancestors' Exodus from Egypt*



▲ Overlooking Nahal Zin from David and Paula Ben-Gurion's graves at Sde Boker. [David Brummer]

By JOEL HABER

Passover is known as Z'man Cheiruteinu (the Time of Our Freedom) and there may be no better place in Israel to feel free than in the northern Negev. So, while we obviously have no way of knowing what will be possible to do on the holiday this year, we can still think of ways to use the region as a means of feeling and embracing our freedom.

If we were able to actually travel around the country on Passover, heading to the desert would help remind us of the time our ancestors spent in the desert following the Exodus, and getting away from the masses that typically crowd the center of the country would similarly be a boon. Alternatively, if pandemic-related circumstances prevent us from physically visiting places, let's remember how for thousands of years of exile, Jews all over the world dreamt of and longed to live freely in our ancestral homeland. Isn't that the way Jews throughout history experienced Passover? Coronavirus won't last forever, so "travel" to the Negev virtually now, and think forward to physically visiting these spots in person in the near future.

The northern Negev region is close enough to the center of the country that it can easily be reached for a day trip. Every site in this article is reachable within approximately two hours by car from both Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. And yet, despite its proximity, the

region is a fairly blank spot in many Israelis' awareness.

There are so many sites in the area that are connected to Zionism and the establishment of the modern State of Israel – arguably the greatest story of Jewish freedom to ever take place. Any selection of sites from this list should make you proudly feel the freedom you live every day in modern Israel.

The ancient, yet modern city of Beersheba has traditionally been seen as the main access point to the Negev region, and also its unofficial capital. Two sites in this city work as the perfect introduction to our exploration of modern Israel.

At Hatzetim Air Force Base, just southwest of Beersheba, sits the official Israeli Air Force Museum. A visit includes a look at historic planes from throughout the state's history. Latrun, the home of the tank museum and Armored Corps Memorial, is much more familiar, due to its location. But in many ways, the IAF Museum at Hatzetim is even more impressive.

With more than 150 planes arranged – generally in historical sequence – it is possible to examine them in order. By noticing the changes, one can trace the history of the state itself. There are three main phases: the early period around the establishment of the state, with foreign planes of mixed origins (whatever the fledgling air force could get its hands on); the 1950s through 1967, when France was our main aircraft supplier; and the post-Six Day War period when America became

our main military trading partner.

Beyond that, there are many fascinating and historic planes on display. Visit the 707 jet plane used during the famous raid at Entebbe in 1976. Explore one of the three existing prototypes of the Lavi fighter jet – a homegrown project that was eventually cancelled due largely to financial considerations. Check out the array of UAVs (drones) and understand the growth of Israel's tech prowess in this field as well.

SPEAKING OF modern technology, one of the newer attractions in Beersheba connects the modern story of the region with the historic: The Gateway to the Negev. Run by the Or Movement, which focuses on development of the Negev and Galilee regions, the Gateway offers a multimedia experience summarizing some of the amazing advances helping sustain life in this desert region today.

Heading south from Beersheba, you have a great opportunity to explore the tremendous successes Israel has had in making the desert bloom. A good place to start is heading to the Mitzpe Revivim site on the kibbutz of the same name. In truth, without the Zionists who settled on this kibbutz, the Negev might not have ended up in Israeli hands.

When the United Nations UNSCOP group was exploring ideas for partition in 1947, the commission members traveled through the land. When they came to Kibbutz Revivim, they were amazed to see the agricultural successes there – in particular,



▲ Israeli-built Kfir fighter jet at the Air Force Museum in Hazerim [Joel Haber]

beautiful gladioli growing in the desert. Refusing to believe their eyes, they pulled the flowers up, thinking they were just stuck into the sands ahead of the commission's visit. But when they saw the roots beneath these flowers, they decided that if the Jews living there could have such success in developing the Negev, they deserved to have it. So, when the map of the United Nations Partition Plan was released, the entire Negev was to be included in the Jewish state.

Just driving through the kibbutz, seeing how lush and green it is despite its desert location, you can't help but marvel at the miracle of modern Israel. Equally, it can help you connect to another of Passover's nicknames: *Chag HaAviv* (the Spring Holiday).

A SHORT drive of fewer than 15 minutes will take you from Revivim to Ashalim, a great place to discover the amazing things Israel is doing right now in the Negev. Already from the time you leave Beersheba, you'll likely have seen a tall tower gleaming in the far distance, with a glowing ball of light at the top. This is the Ashalim Solar-Thermal Power Station, part of a three-section clean-energy site that provides 2.5% of Israel's electricity needs.

It sits adjacent to the Ramat Negev Agricultural R&D Center. There are various agricultural research and development facilities scattered throughout the country, with each working on specific solutions to the challenges farmers in each different region are facing. In this region, one of the major areas of research is growing produce in brackish water, of which there is a tremendous amount lying in the aquifer beneath the Negev desert. It was this very same saline water that the members of Revivim used to grow their flowers. Tours of either or both sites at Ashalim are conducted by the R&D center.

A bit further to the southeast sits Kibbutz Sde Boker. The name most closely associated with this kibbutz is the man who most famously dreamt of Israel making the desert bloom – David Ben Gurion. While many are familiar with his Tel Aviv house, where Ben Gurion lived from 1931 through 1953, fewer know his desert home at Sde Boker. The first Israeli prime minister and his wife, Paula, spent their twilight years in this modest location, now preserved as it stood when they lived there.

A visit to the site provides a glimpse at the human side of this towering figure in our country's history. The highlight for many is a look at Ben Gurion's per-

sonal library. Others appreciate the various exhibits that sit in surrounding buildings, which can help you trace the trajectory from his ideas for the Negev and the State of Israel straight through to their fulfillment today.

Just 10 minutes' drive away sits the perfect spot to pay tribute to the founder of our country. Nestled behind Midreshet Ben Gurion is the official gravesite of David and Paula Ben Gurion. A peaceful and meditative spot, the site features magnificent views over Nahal Zin (the largest such canyon in the Negev). It is easy from this spot to imagine the potential the Ben Gurion saw in the Negev, and also the attraction the region held for him personally as a home.

Tapping into some of that natural beauty itself might be the perfect caper to a day in the region. One ideal option is just adjacent to Ben Gurion's tomb, at Ein Avdat National Park. From the entrance to the site, a short walk takes you past pools of fresh water and various trees and flowers, reaching the highlight of the site: the Ein Avdat Waterfall. From there you can return the same way you came back to the start at the lower parking lot. Alternatively, if you are traveling to the region in two cars, and plan ahead by leaving one car at the end of your path, there is also the option to turn this nature stroll into a bit more of a hike, with a path that continues past the waterfall, and climbs up (with the assistance of metal rungs embedded in the cliff) to the upper parking lot, about 10 minutes' drive further south along Road 40.

Especially in these uncertain times, check with all sites before visiting, to confirm that opening hours are as usual. But a selection of a few of these spots (now or in the near future) should help you live the Passover spirit and connect it to the end point of our redemption – the modern State of Israel. ♦

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▲ Ein Avdat national park. [David Brummer]

