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ZIONISM

Center of attention



THE GIVOT BAR settlement was founded near the Lehavim junction in the South. (Or Movement)

The Or Movement brings the Negev and the Galilee from the periphery to the forefront of Israel

• BY NAAMA BARAK

‘E very generation had its own interpretation of what Zionism is,” says Ofir Fisher, co-founder of the Or Movement. “We felt that it was lacking in our generation, and that there was no longer what there used to be – a mission.”

So Fisher found a mission. The Or Movement, founded in 2002, works to establish new towns, strengthen existing ones and improve the infrastructure in the Negev and the Galilee.

The brainchild of childhood friends, the organization is their attempt to bring Zionism back to the fore in a way that would also provide

a solution to one of Israel’s most acute problems – the concentration of most of the country’s population in the small central region.

“We’re a group of four friends who traveled together to Poland at the age of 16-17. When we came back to the country, our lives changed,” recounts the 39-year-old Fisher, explaining that they wanted to “make sure that Israel is viable and that something like the Holocaust wouldn’t happen again.”

During their army service, he says, “we tried to understand what sort of action could be done that would influence many levels... Very quickly, we came to the conclusion that the key to a big part of our problems has to do with the Negev and the

Galilee.”

“We thought it would be right to do this in a place of consensus,” Fisher says of the decision to focus on Israel’s periphery within the Green Line, calling the project “a renewed challenge that could connect to it the entire Israeli nation.”

He is also quick to point out that the organization’s projects are aimed at all sectors of Israeli society, whether national-religious, ultra-Orthodox, secular or not Jewish at all – the organization is currently working with two Beduin groups – and describes the group’s target audience as “from all across the political spectrum and all across the social spectrum.”

The first thing the group did was



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contact Ariel Sharon – at the time the national infrastructure minister – who was very much on board. “He said to us, ‘Fellows, I’ve been waiting for you for 15 years,’” Fisher recalls. Following the meeting, the group was invited to convert a Nahal Brigade outpost into a civilian community.

“We were given a challenge to populate another 10 families in two months; within two months, we brought 12-13 families. On April 21, 1999, we went up to the ground and founded the community of Sansana in the northern Negev.”

The group then founded another community in the northern Negev, Merhav Am, in 2001, then formalized things and created the Or Movement in 2002. The operational wing of the organization, the Center for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, has altogether founded seven new communities, and helped to relocate more than 30,000 people to those areas. In addition to organizing new communities, the center provides information for people interested in relocating, helps to match employers and potential employees, and looks to find suitable education frameworks and housing solutions in existing towns.

“The Center for Development is in a very strong partnership nowadays with the Negev and Galilee Development Ministry, Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund and JNF-USA,” Fisher details. The center also works with JNF-Australia, the Construction, Economy and Finance ministries and the Prime Minister’s Office, and has initiated 20 government resolutions regarding the Negev and the Galilee. “We hope that more partners will understand the huge need for what we’re doing here and will join the vision.”

After its initial successes, the organization is now moving forward in its plans. “This year, we created a new work plan that takes



CO-FOUNDER Ofir Fisher. (Or Movement)

the State of Israel 100 years after its establishment,” says Fisher, with the goal of thinking of the year 2048 and understanding “how we can make sure that what will be will be the best.”

To this end, the organization focused on statistics which show that by 2048, Israel will be home to 16 million people, out of which 12-13 million will live in the country’s central region. Today, 6.5 million people already live in the Center, and the strain on infrastructure, the environment and housing prices is already very much in place.

The Or Movement’s solution is, of course, in the Negev and the Galilee. While the natural population growth rate indicates that by 2048 1.5 million Israelis will live in these areas, “the Negev and the Galilee need to grow by 4.5 million people through 2048,” states Fisher.

“The main meaning of this for us is the understanding that we need to give a much bigger focus to development towns in the upcoming decade,” notes Fisher, referring to places such as Arad, Ofakim and

Yeroham in the South, as well as to Safed, Shlomi and Hatzor Haglilit in the North.

“The revolution needs to arrive at the development towns. They need to become the most attractive places in which to live in the Negev and the Galilee,” he says, emphasizing that they are the “growth generators” for these areas, as there is a limit to the amount of people who can live in new, rural communities, and that these have already become a standard living option for many.

Asked what his message would be to those deliberating whether to take the plunge and relocate, Fisher quips, “Now’s the time. It’s now or Negev.”

Citing the recent government allocation of funds for infrastructure in the South and the upcoming move of IDF bases to the Negev, he adds, “Now’s the time, in the next few years, to make this move.”

Though as a resident of the Old City of Beersheba himself, he is perhaps not completely unbiased, in his opinion, the Negev and the Galilee are the “best places in Israel to live in.”