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GUSH KATIF SETTLERS EXPRESS THEIR



Photos by Shira Schoenberg

Itzik Amergi has established a garden in memory of his daughter-in-law, Ahuva

"We won't leave. They will have to pick us up like sacks of potatoes"

More than 8,000 Israeli settlers will be forced to abandon their homes in the Gaza Strip this summer under Ariel Sharon's controversial disengagement plan. **SHIRA SCHOENBERG** traveled to Gush Katif and found that its residents are making no plans to leave.

As Itzik Amergi sprawls on a stone ledge

outside the synagogue of Ganei Tal, his eyes light up as he describes his daughter-in-law, Ahuva, who was murdered on the road to Gush Katif by Arab terrorists: "She was 30 years old, a lawyer, successful, beautiful, with two babies." His dark skin toughened by Israeli sun, Amergi points out the Jerusalem stone inscribed with a song Ahuva wrote. The stone sits in the center of a garden he made in her memory. His tone grows tough and certain when he is asked about disengagement. "It won't happen. But if it does, we'll take the garden with us."

slated to be evacuated under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan, has half a lifetime of memories in his community with no plans for "the day after." The sandy agricultural oasis in the Gaza Strip is his home, and he believes it will remain so for years to come.

According to the region's head tour guide, Naor Zilberman, of 8,000 residents in 21 Gaza Jewish communities (16 of which are in Gush Katif), not a single family has evacuated yet. In fact, 120 new families arrived in the last month. The week before Pesach, settlers dedicated a new synagogue in Kfar Darom, and a family finished building a new house in Neve Dekalim. Another resident is in the middle of building a new home.

Zilberman, a young, four-year resident of Tel Katifa with a large knitted kipah and dangling tzitzit, explained: "The situation is not easy, but we continue to build, repair, believe. We build as if there is no disengagement. My grandparents came from Yemen; my parents came from Poland. I'm in Israel - I'm not leaving."

The government does not officially recognize his community, Tel Katifa, which does not even appear on a map. The elec-



A memorial built by local youth in memory of Tali Hatuel and her four children

Amergi, like many residents of Gush Katif, the strip of Jewish settlements

HEARTBREAK OVER DISENGAGEMENT

tricity, sewage and other institutions are registered under the names of neighboring settlements. Yet Tel Katifa boasts 26 families with 62 children, many of whom seemed unaware of impending danger as they played catch and rode their tricycles on the pavement outside their day care caravan.

Zilberman said that after the evacuation of Yamit in the Sinai Peninsula in a 1982 peace agreement with Egypt, some of the houses were brought to Gush Katif. Today, he points with pride to a ceramic sculpture commemorating Yamit filling a wall of a hesder yeshiva in Neve Dekalim, noting that the sculpture is the only Israeli commemoration of Yamit. Zilberman said he does not believe Gush Katif will be another Yamit. "We're continuing life here like normal. People are strong. We have faith that we'll prevail."

Since the region has been thrust into the spotlight, visitors have flocked to Gush Katif's somber memorials, airy synagogues and sun-baked beach. Tourists snap pictures inside a small wooden shed filled with drink and food for soldiers. The shed cost NIS 60,000 (\$13,730) and was built by Gush Katif's youth in memory of Tali Hatuel, who was killed a year ago with her four children at the Kissufim crossing. Yeshivat Hakotel, based in the Old City of Jerusalem, sent 15 students and two rabbis to study in Gush Katif. In the region's smallest settlement, a beachside caravan community of 16 families called Shirat HaYam, visitors from across the country bask in the hot sun and wade in the Mediterranean Sea. A group of schoolchildren from Kibbutz Ein Tzurim run across the sand. According to Zilberman, 180,000 tourists visited during the week of Pesach, a time when Israelis traditionally use their vacation to travel around the country.

But for most residents, life continues as usual, and they are making no plans to leave. Noah and Keren Lax have lived in Ganei Tal for 23 years, raising six children and growing cherry tomatoes and aloe vera.

Noah said living in Gush Katif has given his family a strong sense of love for Israel: the land, the nation and the Torah. "If we don't keep one

of these three, we don't exist. We assimilate, as in America," he said.

The couple has no plans to move their belongings. Noah asked: "Where can I take my things? To where can we go? To a hotel? Will the government create for me a place to work? Houses? Electricity?" Even with the proposed compensation, he said, "the government is stealing 60 percent of the value of my property."

Although the government sent them forms to file for compensation, Keren refuses to touch them. Sounding near tears as she flipped through a packet of forms, Keren said: "I don't want to be a part of this, to get money to be expelled. I won't fill it out. They can do that themselves."

Keren added: "They want to uproot cemeteries, families. We're a special community, we want to stay together. There's a lack of justice. We're told leave your greenhouse, your house, nice and orderly. I should leave what we built? David Hatuel's family was murdered and now it's possible the terrorist who killed his family will live in his house?"

If the IDF tries to evacuate them, Keren said, "We're not leaving by our own power. I won't raise a hand against a soldier, but they'll have to pick us up like sacks of potatoes."

Anita Tucker, who made aliya from Brooklyn, N.Y., has

grown celery in the settlement of Netzer Hazani for 29 years and was one

of the first residents of Gush Katif. During the current intifada, a Kassam rocket fell near her living room window, blowing glass inside toward her grandchildren, who were inside playing with their toys. Miraculously, they survived without a scratch. But this did not dissuade her from wanting to live there: "The way to fight terror is not by giving in. Neighbors have to live peacefully. If they can't, they should leave. Why me? I didn't shoot anyone."

Like other long-time residents, she has no plans to move.

NEXT WEEK: In part two of the Jewish Advocate's exclusive focus on the impact of Ariel Sharon's withdrawal plan, Shira Schoenberg considers the effect disengagement will have on Gush Katif's \$60 million-a-year agricultural industry.

Fact file

The Gaza Strip is 223 square miles, and it is home to 1.3 million Palestinians and 8,000 Jews. Jews control 25 square miles (11 percent), although more Arabs than Jews live in the Jewish-controlled area.

The Jewish settlements in Gaza include:

- 21 communities**
- 36 synagogues**
- 48 graves**
- 5 elementary schools with 1,150 students**
- 3 high schools with 387 students**
- 6 yeshivot with over 400 students**

- Neve Dekalim is the biggest community with 670 families, including a number of houses built two years ago under Ariel Sharon.

- Shirat HaYam is the smallest community with 16 families.

- There have been 11,000 attempted terror attacks in the region since September 2000, which have killed 94 Israelis, including 27 civilians and 67 soldiers.

Compiled by Head Gush Katif Travel Guide Naor Zilberman, Gaza Regional Council, and Gush Katif resident Anita Tucker



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Keren Lax holds a Kassam rocket