

## HOLY BLOSSOM TEMPLE ISRAEL COMMITTEE E-MAIL NEWSLETTER

The Holy Blossom Temple Israel Committee presents the May 12, 2008 issue of the Israel Committee E-Mail Newsletter. This is a subjective compilation of key articles about Israel, from a large number of sources, prepared by volunteers from our Temple community. The Newsletter will usually be issued two times per month. Given the overwhelming breadth and depth of information available to all of us regarding Israel today, we hope to highlight key information in order to share and deepen our congregation's knowledge of the current situation.

While efforts are made to verify the accuracy of the material distributed, we do not guarantee its accuracy. The materials attached do not necessarily reflect the views of Holy Blossom Temple. The newsletter is also available on the Holy Blossom Temple Website ([www.holyblossom.org](http://www.holyblossom.org)) and a hard copy can be obtained from the Temple Library. *Jeff Denaburg, Rivanne Sandler, Co-Chairs, Holy Blossom Temple Israel Committee*

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1. "Middle Israel: Israel's happiest accomplishment," by Amotz Asa-El. Jerusalem Post, May 7, 2008

Having just emerged from another day in first grade, Aviad asked me, for some reason, who was our prime minister, and I answered he was Ariel Sharon. "Really?" replied the toddler, "and I thought it was Yossi Benayoun."

Yossi Benayoun, the soccer forward who was born humbly in Dimona, has since climbed to international stardom in Liverpool, and Aviad, now a fifth grader who has also evolved, was asked this week what he thought Israel's best accomplishments were in its first six decades. He said: The Yom Kippur War and the disk-on-key.

"Now there is a thesis," I thought to myself. On the one hand - an epic military victory involving hordes of soldiers, casualties, prisoners, tanks, missiles, aircraft, diplomats, journalists, dollars, spies and oil barrels, all of them surrounding the tiny Jewish state the way the brothers' sheaves circled Joseph's in his dream; and on the other hand, a morsel of tin and plastic that stores entire livelihoods, and symbolizes the ingenuity which has

inspired thousands of inventions here, from MS medicine and firewall software to unmanned aircraft and drip irrigation.

As it marks its 60th birthday, many find Israel's shortcomings greater than its accomplishments. Celebrity lawyer Ya'acov Weinroth, for instance, has just decried in Haaretz our being possessed by greed, while the Atlantic Monthly asks on its cover: "Is Israel Finished?" As the ones who ordinarily decry Israel's every failure, sin and shortcoming, Middle Israelis now wish to remind the whole world that Israel is not finished, that if anything it has hardly begun, and that in fact its accomplishments are well beyond its founders' wildest dreams.

Israel's most famous achievements have been the military ones, mainly because they were dramatic, violent and contentious. Today this is hard to recall, but back when the state was established its survival was in such doubt that the IDF chief of General Staff had to travel to Switzerland to study its army's system of reserve duty. Since then the IDF has become so big that many wonder whether it isn't too big.

More deeply, but in the same vein, the very emergence of Jewish paratrooper brigades, submarine flotillas, artillery batteries, tank battalions and fighter-plane squadrons - so soon after the Jews were so non-military that they were butchered en masse - is a twist of historic events that even an exceptionally imaginative novelist could doubtfully have conceived without critics questioning his sanity.

Diplomatically, the Jewish state has also registered once-unthinkable breakthroughs. Today this is hard to believe, but in its first 16 years Israel did not buy even one bullet from the US. The first elaborate military contracts were with France and lasted only a decade, as Paris decided in 1967 to side with Israel's enemies. Now Israel has just about all it needs militarily, thanks to local production and brisk foreign trade, but none of it came by itself.

The same goes for diplomatic relations. The young Jewish state's unconditional ostracism by the Arab world soon spread to much of the Non-aligned Bloc, then, following the '67 war to the entire East Bloc (except Romania) and finally, following the '73 war, Israel also lost in one fell swoop all its embassies in Black Africa.

Now all this is history. Israel has full and elaborate ties with Eastern Europe, non-Arab Africa, China and Vietnam. Moreover, previously low-level relations with India and Turkey have since morphed into fully-fledged strategic alliances. Add to that the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and the de facto relations with some of the Gulf and Maghreb states, and compare that with David Ben-Gurion's prediction in 1970 that peace with Egypt would come, but might take three decades to arrive - and you get a perspective on how far and how fast we have traveled.

Not to mention the economy. Israel's lack of mineral riches, its small workforce's inability to mass-produce anything and its industry's lack of access to the neighbouring markets all made many doubt its ability to survive, let alone thrive. In subsequent years,

the failure of its centralized economy and the costs of its wars resulted in such hyperinflation that the economy became a basket case and the shekel a laughingstock.

Now the Bank of Israel is regularly buying dollars to keep the shekel from becoming excessively strong, while foreign companies ask Israeli business partners to pay them in the Israeli currency, which has become fully convertible and is now among the world's most solid coins. Israel has become the developed world's fastest-growing economy; who would have thought.

Still, these dwarf in comparison with Israel's social-cultural accomplishments.

It has been less than three decades since then-Labour Party leader Shimon Peres had to be whisked away from Beit Shemesh, where a predominantly North African-descended audience pelted him with eggs and tomatoes as the representative of well-to-do, Ashkenazi Israel. Who today remembers this, with kids increasingly unable to ethnically "classify" each other, and with non-Ashkenazi tycoons like Yitzhak Teshuva, Haim Saban and Tzadik Bino dominating much of the business sector? The same goes for the religious-secular rift. To us it goes without saying that the IDF, by law, keeps kosher in all its kitchens, but back when the state was established someone had to decree that, as well as the law forbidding industrial production on the Sabbath and civil marriages and divorces, all of which conceal serious controversies that could have debilitated the Jewish state, but never did.

Even happier is the restoration of the Hebrew language. Next time our leaders, enemies or friends make you want to jump out of the window, look behind your shoulder and imagine Eliezer Ben-Yehuda - author of the first modern Hebrew dictionary - is suddenly there, ready to hear you. "What can you show me that will make me happy?" he will ask, and you will take him down to the nearest playground, kindergarten, school yard, grocery store, hospital, law firm or engineers' office, and then observe him absorb - like a composer scrutinizing a symphony orchestra's performance of his own sonata - the kids' play, the grocer's counting, the school children's shouts, the kindergarten teacher's storytelling, the engineer's calculation, the surgeon's operation and the lawyers' negotiation, all rolling about in the very Hebrew whose resurrection he insisted was both feasible and imperative, while some ridiculed and others persecuted that hero for his odd cultural vision and resolve.

Then take Ben-Yehuda for a stroll up the Jerusalem pedestrian mall that is now named after him, and then proceed to one of the nearby ultra-Orthodox neighbourhoods where the offspring of the rabbis who once boycotted him now themselves speak Hebrew, and then take him across the country - to get a load of our numerous Hebrew novels, periodicals, movies, plays, poems, operas, university courses, TV shows, evening schools, political debates and what not.

Then, looking at that prophet's gulping of his vision's realization, you, too, will appreciate that in breathing life into the language of Moses, David and Isaiah, and in speaking it to our kids, we are doing the unthinkable every minute anew, and that in this, what Israel

represents is even more improbable, rewarding and vindicating than winning a war and inventing the disk-on-key.

2. "Reform movement celebrates first state-funded synagogue," by Yair Ettinger. Haaretz, May 11, 2008

A stranger arriving in the Shimshoni neighbourhood of Modi'in this past Monday probably would have thought he had stumbled on a ceremony marking the establishment of a new settlement or outpost. Hundreds of excited men, women and children filled the exposed lot, in the center of which stood a lone prefab structure, which had been placed there the day before by a giant crane. Hundreds of blue-and-white flags flapped in the late afternoon breeze as a children's choir sang "How goodly are they tents, O Jacob."

The speeches resonated like the beating of the wings of history: "This is an historic day of rejoicing"; "this place has been built in the spirit of the prophet of the state, who said, 'If you will it, it is no legend'"; "the people here have a deep faith in the justness of their path. We no longer have to justify ourselves: We are here"; "we were privileged to be pioneers"; and "we gaze in amazement, hardly daring to believe."

But a quick glance at the festive crowd and the speakers made it clear that the dress code, at least, was not the one associated with settlers in the territories. Most of the men were bareheaded, but a few of the women wore ornamental kippas. In fact, it was a ceremony of Judaism's Reform Movement, dedicating the movement's new home in Modi'in, the new city that lies halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The new synagogue's name is Yozma, a word meaning "initiative" and also an acronym standing for "Contemporary Judaism, the nation's heritage." What differentiates this synagogue from the movement's other spiritual centers in Israel is the wording on a small stone plaque that is affixed to the structure's outer wall. The text states that the building was erected by the Ministry of Housing and Construction. This is in fact the first Reform synagogue in Israel to be established with government funding.

As is usually the case in matters involving the non-Orthodox movements in Israel, the story began with a petition to the High Court of Justice - in this case, against the Housing Ministry and the Modi'in municipality - over the unequal funding of synagogues and community centers. Unusually, however, the story ended with willing cooperation by the relevant governmental bodies. In return for the suspension of the legal proceedings, the minister of housing at the time, Isaac Herzog, signed an agreement in 2005 for the establishment of six transportable synagogues.

It is unlikely that these synagogues herald a new era for the non-Orthodox movements in Israel, as the agreement was signed in the very brief period, at the end of 2005, when Herzog, who is from the Labour Party, served as housing minister in the government of Ariel Sharon. Since then, a new government has been formed, one in which the ultra-Orthodox Shas party is a senior partner, and as such was able to secure the reestablishment of the Religious Affairs Ministry, which is once more in charge of funding for synagogues. The Reform and Conservative Movements are now waging a

series of battles in the High Court of Justice against this ministry, notably a demand for Reform rabbis to be granted the status of neighbourhood rabbis.

But in the meantime, the Yozma congregation's first synagogue is cause for rejoicing. "It took the State of Israel 60 years to provide us with a synagogue," said the leader of the congregation, Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon. "In my eyes, this is the pioneering of our time. This is the new Zionism. People think we have built the Taj Mahal here." This Taj Mahal, a structure of 200 square meters, cost the state more than NIS 500,000. The Modi'in municipality invested tens of thousands of shekels in landscaping.

The Yozma congregation was created in Modi'in 11 years ago and now runs six kindergartens and an elementary school in the city. Some 550 families receive community and educational services from it, and 240 of them are registered members of the synagogue. The co-leader of the community, along with Shiryon, is Rabbi Nir Barkin.

"A precedent has been set here," said Rabbi Gilad Kariv, chairman of the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center, "in that local governments can no longer continue to ignore us. Without purporting to declare that a taboo has been broken here, this is nevertheless the first time the state has invested money on this scale to advance the life of a Reform congregation. It is also the first time that we moved from a legal battle to close cooperation. There was a transformation here - from a fight to the finish, to partnership by the Modi'in municipality."

The mayor of Modi'in, Moshe Spector, who initially refused to fund the Reform synagogue, was taken on a tour of Reform congregations in the United States. He met the president of the World Reform Movement, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, and apparently became enamoured of the idea that members of the Reform Movement would flock to Israel and populate his city. "The hills will be filled with Reform congregations," the mayor told the crowd, and dramatized his vision by pointing toward the horizon. Spector spoke of no fewer than "50,000 members of the Reform Movement in the United States" eventually coming to the city, and concluded his speech with a call to the assembled audience: "You must ensure, each of you, that Jews come here, to Modi'in."

3. "One on one: Seeing the forest for the trees," by Ruthie Blum. Jerusalem Post, May 8, 2008

The fifth Keren Kayemet Leyisrael-Jewish National Fund (KKL-JNF) World Leadership Conference is under way, with more than 150 delegates from the Diaspora having gathered here to celebrate Independence Day, tour the country and discuss past, present and future Holy Land endeavours. These include water purification, farm development and global warming research - issues they not only hold dear, but on the basis of which they fill their till - literally and figuratively - by passing around the little blue box that has been their trademark for more than a century.

**In an hour-long interview at his Jerusalem office on the eve of the conference, KKL-JNF World Chairman Efi Stenzler waxes poetic about the 200-or-so projects in the works "from Metulla to Eilat," among them a Tel Aviv-Jerusalem bicycle path his organization intends to give Israel as a gift on Rosh Hashana.**

**Q.** On April 15, the KKL-JNF and the Antiquities Authority presented Prime Minister Ehud Olmert with a gift for the state's 60th birthday, in the form of the Adulam Park in the Eila Valley. Why, then, a mere three weeks later, are you holding an international conference here?

**A.** Since everything we do for Israel, we do through our donors - we don't receive a single shekel from the state - every two years, we hold a conference for KKL-JNF people from 33 countries worldwide to update one another about what's going on in Israel, and discuss the agenda, programs for the future, fund-raising methods, etc. These conferences are traditionally held in February or March. But this year, I requested that we have the conference in May, because of Independence Day, to give participants the opportunity both to experience the special festive atmosphere and to see the country during the spring, when the weather is good.

**Q.** You mention fund-raising. Is the traditional "blue-box" method still in use at all?

**A.** Yes, there are countries in which collection in the blue boxes is still in effect.

**Q.** Is it still a recognizable symbol with which Jews identify?

**A.** Well, the question is often raised as to whether it's better to raise \$100,000 from a single donor, from many donors or from blue boxes. And we reached the conclusion that the answer is all of the above. While on the subject, it's important to state that we want to widen the scope of our contributors' awareness of KKL-JNF activities, not only to increase the number of donors abroad, but to encourage the younger generation to continue to feel that connection to the KKL-JNF and to Israel - by donating a tree or a forest or a reservoir or a park.

**Q.** After the Second War in Lebanon, you conducted a large-scale operation to restore the forests in the North that had burned down as a result of Katyusha fire. Is it easier for you to raise funds during times of crisis?

**A.** There is no doubt that war is a unifying event, within Israel as well. So, yes, the war in Lebanon led to increased donations to KKL-JNF. This doesn't mean, however, that we are only able to operate during wartime. KKL has been around for more than 100 years. Since its establishment in 1901 - with the purchase of the first 200 dunams [in pre-state Palestine] - Jews bought land. By 1948, there were about a million dunams of land in the hands of Jews in this country, from which 360 yishuvim [settlement communities] were built. Indeed, one could say that the KKL-JNF, through the help of Diaspora Jews, determined the borders of the State of Israel. If we hadn't had the land, we wouldn't have been able to establish communities, moshavim, kibbutzim and cities. It wouldn't have

been possible to settle the Jews here. Today, the KKL-JNF has more than 2 million dunams, a large portion of which are for agriculture, the most developed in the world. The point is that the Jews of the Diaspora have risen to the plate through thick and thin.

**Q.** Speaking of land, what is going on with the petition to the High Court of Justice filed by Adallah (the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel) regarding KKL-JNF policy of only selling land to Jews?

**A.** First of all, the KKL-JNF doesn't sell land; it leases it. The body that handles the 2 million dunams of KKL-JNF land is the Israel Lands Administration (ILA), in accordance with an agreement that was signed between the government and the KKL-JNF in 1961. From then and until 2004, if a non-Jew wanted to lease land owned by the KKL-JNF, the ILA would lease it to him, and in exchange, the KKL-JNF would receive the equivalent amount of land in another location in the country. For reasons independent of the KKL-JNF, in 2004, the ILA stopped operating this way. The result was that Adallah petitioned the courts.

**Q.** Do you mean that the ILA stopped "reimbursing" the KKL-JNF, or that it stopped leasing land to non-Jews altogether?

**A.** It's more complicated than that. It's connected to the Gadish Committee [headed by the late Ya'acov Gadish, that was established in May 2004 by Olmert, when he was minister of industry, trade and labour, to "define the main operational aims of the ILA with regard to its structure and modes of operation." The principal recommendations included the transfer of urban residential land ownership rights to private owners of apartments and buildings, and the streamlining of the process surrounding land-ownership rights]. In other words, to minimize the bureaucracy involved in the relation between a citizen and the ILA, the state wanted to enable people with long-term leases to purchase their residences. It's important to note here that the cases of the ILA's leasing KKL-JNF land to non-Jews amounted to five-seven per year, out of tens of thousands of transactions. But, people who aren't familiar with the material took the opportunity to blow the whole issue out of proportion - particularly since, when this reached the court a few months ago, the government announced that it was willing to continue operating as it had been doing before.

**Q.** Are you saying the affair is over and done with?

**A.** No. The petition filed by Adallah is still with the High Court of Justice, but we have already announced that we would be willing to continue operating as we had until 2004.

**Q.** How do you answer critics who accuse you of discrimination or racism for leasing land only to Jews?

**A.** I would remind them that the ILA continues to lease our land to non-Jews, in spite of the fact that the land was purchased by Jews in the Diaspora with whose help the State of Israel was built. Israel is first and foremost a Jewish state, and the KKL-JNF is a Jewish,

Zionist organization - though, of course, we also have to remember that we live in a democracy in which the citizens are not all Jews.

**Q.** Now to the water issue. Former president of American JNF Ron Lauder once said that Israel's water shortage could be solved easily through purification and desalination, if it weren't hindered by the monopoly of the country's national water company, Mekorot. Is this true?

**A.** Mekorot is on the way to privatization, and therefore is no longer a government-owned company. This year, KKL-JNF is about to dedicate its 200th reservoir. Close to 40 percent of Israel's agriculture relies on the reservoirs built by the KKL-JNF from donations collected in the Diaspora. These reservoirs consist of recycled sewage water. Israel is greener as a result.

As you know, Israel is a desert. And I estimate that future conflicts in the region will not be about land, but rather about water. Israel is extremely advanced when it comes to water technology, and we keep developing. In the future, Israel will be able to export purified water to other countries. Don't forget that water has no borders. And when there is pollution, it spreads.

**Q.** Israel, as you point out, is a desert. Is the KKL-JNF involved in enhancing the development and use of solar energy?

**A.** We intend to get more involved in the field of alternative energy, particularly solar, which will be crucial in developing the Negev. In fact, we will not only be sponsoring single projects, but rather engaging in a wider program that would also put income back into the KKL-JNF.

**Q.** At this year's Herzliya Conference, the KKL-JNF made a presentation about the connection between trees and their effect on global warming. Can you elaborate on that?

**A.** There is no doubt that the planet is heating up, for many reasons, some of them ecological. So, what we are doing, together with the Weizmann Institute, is conducting research about the effect of trees on global warming. This research is being carried out in the Yatir forest in the Negev, where eventually we will establish a visitors' center, where people can see the results of our research and learn about the whole topic.

We do know, however, that trees lower temperatures. And since its establishment, the KKL-JNF has planted about 240 million trees in this country. As a result, Israel today is green - no longer the "barren hills" that Theodor Herzl saw while travelling by train from Jaffa to Jerusalem [in 1898]. So, we are fulfilling Herzl's dream. David Ben-Gurion, too, had a dream - that one day there would be a billion trees here. Well, we've got a ways to go before reaching a billion. But we are embarking on a campaign of "a tree for every resident."

This is a shmita year [sabbatical during which nothing can be planted], but beginning on Tu Bishvat [the "new year" of the trees that falls in late January or early February], we are going to launch this campaign, in conjunction with the local and regional authorities and other bodies.

Eventually, I want to have a campaign for "a tree for every Jew in the world" - where we will be able to create forests here for different [Jewish] communities all over the world. This is but one of many topics on the agenda of the current conference.

**Q.** Since the days of Ephraim Kishon's satire that was made into the 1960s film, *Salah Shabbati* (starring Haim Topol) - in which fun is poked at the alleged practice of replacing the plaques near trees supposedly planted in donors' names every time a different one came to visit a forest - has the attitude in this country towards the KKL-JNF changed?

**A.** A poll that we conducted following a public service commercial about the KKL-JNF that appeared on TV a few weeks ago indicates that the Israeli public has been increasingly exposed to and aware of the organization, though not as much as we'd like. We have a lot of work ahead of us in that respect, and in strengthening the connection between donors in the Diaspora and the projects in Israel which they contribute to and are a part of.

As for the methods supposedly employed in the days of *Salah Shabbati* - if they ever existed at all - they are definitely a thing of the past.

4. "The Queen of the Negev gets her palace," by Yocheved Miriam Russo. *Jerusalem Post*, May 11, 2008

It's taken seven long years, but finally Beersheba's long-awaited, much-discussed, soaring new NIS 150 million 'Culture Hall' is in the end stages of construction. Officials hope the nearly-completed structure will put the city on Israel's cultural map. Workers are still busy with electrical hook-ups, tile work and installing inside fixtures and furnishings, but a Grand Opening date has been set: On September 22, Israel's government leaders, Knesset members, local dignitaries and anyone else who can snag a ticket will come together to celebrate and cut the ceremonial ribbon.

For Beersheba - dubbed the "Queen of the Negev," but with few palaces to prove it - the new Culture Hall signals a significant step forward for those who live in the South. "This building will change the character of Beersheba," says Eli Malul, Beersheba's Municipal Construction Manager, who's working overtime to oversee the finishing touches. "It will be known as a 'Culture Hall,' but in the office, we've been calling it the mishkan, like in the Temple. It will be a dwelling place, a place for the arts, an asset that will allow Beersheba to host any kind of music, opera, theatre, dance or other performance the country has to offer. There's nothing like it in the entire country."

The new hall will be a permanent home for both the Beersheba Sinfonietta and the Beersheba Theatre, offering abundant offices, rehearsal space and performance venues. But beyond that, with two separate theatres, Beersheba will be able to host not only classical music and theatre, but also dance troupes and opera, the latter of which requires sophisticated stage enhancements not previously available.

Even now, the hall's two theatres give every indication of being magnificent by the time seats and plush carpeting are installed. The smaller of the two seats a modest 420, but with state-of-the-art electronically operated stage and scenery drops, and several catwalks with specialized lighting, it's likely to be a popular venue for all kinds of performances. The larger theatre - which will seat just under a thousand people - is a work of art in itself. With a domed ceiling fitted with hundreds of tiny lights that shine like stars, it boasts tiered seats on the floor level, and loge seats in several side balconies. There won't be a bad seat anywhere in the house. The orchestra pit is enhanced with an elevator, allowing the orchestra to rise and descend, while the stage itself has a sub-level, also equipped with elevators, to augment performances when required, or just to make changing scenery easier. Above the stage, a maze of scenery installations dangles high above audience eye level - equipment that will allow scenes and props to be raised and lowered from a central switchboard. High above the seats, five catwalks are lined with stage lights that can be adjusted to highlight virtually anything in the theatre.

Each theatre has its own foyer, so two separate productions can play simultaneously. Throughout, earth-coloured tiles - in Negev colors - blend with modernistic glass and mirror. A step-down café and cafeteria with a mirrored ceiling offers a pleasant place for audiences to gather, and from there they can enter either of the theatres via separate grand staircases or elevators. Just outside the building's arching glass entryway, there's even a "late elevator," allowing latecomers to be whisked directly to the theatre level without passing through the front doors, and without disturbing others. Malul notes that the entire structure is handicapped-accessible, with no-step entryways, ramps, several elevators, and even special places in the theatres designed to accommodate wheelchairs.

Those are the public parts. But Malul is equally proud of the "employee" accommodations the building offers, whose benefits musicians, dancers, directors and other professionals will enjoy. "In the back of the building, there's a big plaza, where all kinds of outdoor events can take place. From there, a stairway leads to a back entrance for performers," he says. "There will be an information desk there, a ticket office, and a place to wait, if you have an appointment with someone upstairs. Above, there are five floors of office space, with dozens of private offices for both the Sinfonietta and the Theatre people. The offices are different sizes and configurations, but each has an outside window and an airy feel."

A "green room" will host actors and musicians as they await their moment in the limelight. "Performers can come here to relax and prepare. We'll have comfortable chairs, and a few tables for coffee, snacks or even lunch. There'll be a few desks and places for people to meet."

State-of-the-art rehearsal space is another plus: "There are two separate rehearsal rooms," Malul says. "Each is quite large, and comes equipped with soundproof walls and parquet floors, so dancers can rehearse here, too. There's also lighting equipment, and even room to move in a stage, so these rehearsal rooms could be used for actual performances, if someone wanted. Dressing rooms are nearby. There's lots of space."

Today, electrician Avi Galon says his crew is still working to perfect the highly complex electrical and lighting systems that cover the huge structure - both theatres, rehearsal halls, the public rooms, offices and entryways. When asked if it's been a tough job, Galon laughs. "It's been very complex, very difficult. But we're getting it done. We've had to make some changes and adjustments along the way."

The building - situated on the busy intersection of Rehov Rager and Sderot Shazar, just across the street from the municipal buildings - has attracted considerable interest from passers-by, who have watched it rise from its early days as a hole in the ground. With its soaring arches, jutting modernistic graphics and glass walls rising to 20 meters, it's impossible to miss from the busy streets. "Lots of people have asked about the stairway," Malul notes, pointing to a two-level metal staircase currently appended to the north side of the building. "That's not staying. It's just part of the construction equipment. It will be gone, and something else will be there, a balcony, perhaps."

Other issues have cropped up as well. "Some of the light bulbs set into the extraordinarily high ceilings can't be changed from inside," he says. "We'll have to work something out, maybe find a way to change them from the top of the building, going down in. Most of the outside glass walls will have to be washed that way, too, with scaffolds coming down from the top." Parking is another issue. "Parking is a problem. There's not enough, we know that," Malul says. "But the biggest events will most likely be taking place at night, in which case there's also parking available across the street near the government buildings."

Malul acknowledges it's been a long haul to completion. "Getting the Culture Hall built has been an enormous undertaking. It was a very expensive proposition," he admits. "If it hadn't been for Mayor Ya'acov Ternner, it wouldn't have been built at all. Mayor Ternner did it - he fought for it all the way. It took someone like that, with vision and commitment, to see it through."

September 22, the Queen of the Negev will have her palace.

The Holy Blossom E-Mail Newsletter is prepared by Rivanne Sandler, editor with the assistance, on rotation of Charles Cohen, and Adam Sol. Sheila Smolkin serves as appraiser.