
An Old Story Lives Again

by Dr. DeWayne Coxon

Two years ago [2020], Dr. DeWayne Coxon started writing the story of Biblical Tamar Park which began forty years ago with the help of dozens of volunteers. His brother-in-law, Dr. David Parks, who also spent a considerable amount of time at the Park, is the editor of the story. We are beginning with the introduction and will continue segments of this story for months to come.



Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Don Smith, David Parks, and my wife, Lexie, for helping me remember the stories of our work in Israel for over forty years. They helped me write the stories and gave me ideas and advice along the way.

I thank my family, friends, partners, donors, and each volunteer who made these stories happen. Their love, devotion, and tolerance made Biblical Tamar Park in Israel possible.

At the back of the booklet is a list of those who served at the Park for significant periods of time.

CHAPTER ONE

Temperatures at 120 Degrees

In **1982** my wife, Lexie, and I traveled to Israel because I had been thinking about an idea to build a greenhouse in Israel since leading a group of professional engineers, interested in solar energy, to Israel in 1979. We had heard of Simha Pearlmutter down in the Arava at Kibbutz Ir Ovot in southern Israel and I wanted to meet him. We rented a car and drove down but I didn't make a connection at that time because I thought we would build a greenhouse in Tel Aviv.

In January 1983, my son, Rob, and I flew to Israel to explore ways that Jordan College students could spend a semester studying in Israel. We were not yet acquainted enough with the residents of Kibbutz Ir Ovot to realize that this would be the obvious place. Several things would have to come together to make that possible.

Later in 1983 a group of U.S. ministers, most from Michigan, accompanied me to "take another look at Ir Ovot" but I was not sure yet of the purpose. My brother-in-law, David Parks, Ron Currier, and Bill Horn, came along as the only non-ministers in the group to share their insights from the laymen's perspective. Our question was whether or not to become involved, but with little knowledge as to where it might lead.

Ministers who traveled with Lexie and me on the trip were Rev. James & Marilyn Bugg, Rev. James & Judy Willett, Rev. Jerry & Karen Kovacs, Rev. Mark and Vicki Barclay, Rev. Cletus & Carol Snellenberger, and Rev. Larry & Audrey Young. A BREF committee, (Blossoming Rose Environmental Fund) was formed and this group was faithful to continue to search for meaning and to advise accordingly. To varying degrees, they have all stayed in touch and some were and remain heavily involved. (Real meaning and mission were to come several years later.)

The tel had no place for the group to sleep, so we bedded at the field school down the road. In the morning, we made a quick trip to Ir Ovot at the tel, where we tripped over trash and rusting machine parts. I wanted the ministers to meet Simha Pearlmutter in the event that we might want to help them in some way. The seed was sown but we did not know it at the time.

----A Green House

A year later, we were hours from boarding our flight when a friend called from Tel Aviv. The local building council would not approve our experimental solar greenhouse. We had spent months perfecting the design with Hebrew University and the SorkoRam Corporation, and El Al Israel Airlines had granted specific one-time permission to fly the sensitive acrylic panels to Israel. Yet this preliminary work would be wasted. I told myself not to feel rattled.

So, in July 1984, with my son Rob and son-in-law Gary, we boarded our flight from Chicago. We landed in Israel, and a friend in Tel Aviv reminded us about how to find our way to Kibbutz Ir Ovot where we hoped we could get permission to build the greenhouse in the Arava.

We arrived at Kibbutz Ir Ovot about noon the following day. When we stepped out of the car, in spite of my strict Free Methodist Church upbringing, I thought we had landed in Hell. **Simha Pearlmutter** greeted us and explained that Tamar's 120-degree temperatures are the second highest in the world, and if we were hungry, we could fry an egg on any rock. We believed him.

Simha gave us the needed permission, and we began the greenhouse foundation at the base of a hill by the kibbutz office. Rob, Gary, and I drew three buckets of cold water from the kibbutz tap, dipped towels in, and draped them over our heads to let the cool water drip down our backs. The sun soon heated the water, so we refilled the pails with cool water from the tap several times throughout the day.

As we laid the footings, fixed our food, and plodded along, we got acquainted with the Pearlmutter family. They shared stories of life in the desert and how they came to live in the old Israeli army base at Ir Ovot.

We peppered Simha with questions and learned that they had some serious financial needs, some unpaid utility bills, and not enough food on their table. The community at Ir Ovot

numbered eight – Simha, his wife Rachel and their two sons, Ari and Dari, their parents, Harry and Rose, and two others unrelated, Peter and Yehuda.

We finished the foundation and hired Bedouin masons who completed the greenhouse. Two botanists, Ned and Jean Keefer, from Indiana University, tested the effectiveness of the greenhouse for growing vegetables. They spent a few months monitoring and reporting data.

We, however, had flown home to raise funds to help Simha and his family.

----*Money – Spreading the Word*

We had learned from Simha that he needed several thousand dollars to meet his past due obligations. After the ministers had traveled with Lexie and me to Israel in 1983, we began inviting, ministers, family and friends to a series of banquets and group meetings to consider our involvement. After learning of the specific financial needs of the Pearlmutter community, I reported those needs to those who attended our banquets and special gatherings. **David and Heatherlee Nielson**, who attended one of those early banquets, made a very substantial contribution to pay the past due bills. It was then that we began a serious effort to help support and develop the Kibbutz.

The word was also spread by organizing activities here in the States. We held an annual forum and symposium for several years where we fellowshiped, listened to Rabbis speak, listened to volunteers share testimonies and songs, and used the opportunity to ask for financial support. We ate together and worshipped together while the children played and gathered memories that have lasted a lifetime,

Chapter Two Farming and Greening

----Tomatoes and more tomatoes

The Ir Ovot farm needed help to plant fields and harvest crops for income purposes. That required money to buy seeds, fertilizer and water, and since we had begun to raise funds to support the Kibbutz, it was time to make further investments. There was a good market for tomatoes and other vegetables in Israel so we thought raising crops might help the cause. People volunteered to pick tomatoes and sweat in the sun on a scale none of us comprehended at the time. The land, uncultivated for thousands of years, was ready, with proper water and costly fertilizer, to “give forth,” and we were astonished as we picked hundreds of bushels of tomatoes.

The next year, they asked us to help again, so we planted cucumbers, peppers, melons, and egg plants. Everything grew beyond belief and hundreds of volunteers flew to Israel to help plant the seeds, pull the weeds, pick the vegetables, and pack them for shipping. Neighboring farmers approached us about flying in volunteers to work in their fields which we declined to do.

During these earliest days, there were two men, John Leppien from Michigan and Bill Horn from California, who made substantial contributions that may have made the

difference between us coming back home to stay or continuing the efforts that have turned into a very long term project.

After the excitement and stress, though, of farming for two years, we began to see our limitations. Other good people saw them too. Rob, Gary, and I had gone to Israel to build a solar greenhouse, which we did. The testing was completed on the greenhouse, and now the energy of hundreds of faithful volunteers was stretching much farther into farming than any of us had planned or imagined.

During the years that we spent faithfully farming, there were a few volunteers who spent a lot of their time and money at the Kibbutz finding ways to make the world a better place. Vernamae Eplett and Lois Bergsma were at the right place at the right time to serve people in their time of need. Lois spent several weeks helping with housekeeping food services, and praying for everyone involved. Vernamae's prayers for Harry were considered life-saving, and after seeing Harry literally come back from what appeared to be his dying day, was at Tamar again four years later when she helped prepare him for burial.

----Greening the Desert

"The desert (Hebrew, Arava) shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." Isaiah 35:1

During the 1970s, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) planted a five acre grove at Kibbutz Ir Ovot with seedlings. These tiny trees do well in the desert when watered regularly in their first years, but they did not receive enough water, so most were dead or dying.

Rev. James and Marilyn Bugg from the minister's group in 1983, caught the vision right away to help remove debris, rescue sick trees and plant healthy new ones. They pastored a large church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, so they invited people from their church to visit the Kibbutz and to help with the removal of discarded mattresses, wire fence rolls, and other debris.

Many are the stories about what happened when 50 people arrived to begin their volunteer work. Had it not been for Jim and Marilyn the experience would have been a disaster. The housing can't really be described, but Jim and Marilyn kept telling them that it was a "camping and blessing Israel experience." Needless to say, they did their best to be good sports and before it was over, they felt that they were God's chosen.

With the consent of the Central Arava Regional Council, Blossoming Rose started plantings which would later inspire a more complete "Garden of the Ages," identified in our Five Year Plan (2020-2024) chapter near the end of this booklet.

At the time, however, we planted olive, date palm, tamarisk, and marula trees while we cleared debris, a true hands-on group doing everything with shovels, rakes, and picks.

Brave volunteers fainted in the heat. Evening prayers and Bible study looked very attractive – the sooner the better.

The Buggs traveled from Michigan to Israel several weeks each year and, with the help of many volunteers, planted hundreds of trees, shrubs, and flowers throughout the Park.

Bougainvillea shades the entrance to the dining room, thanks to their vision and leadership. They spent weeks and months toiling in the hot sun, planting the small date palms, olives trees, acacia, tamarisk, and other desert species donated by the JNF.

----Meeting Dr. Rudolph Cohen

There were three key "turning points" during our first thirty-seven years. Meeting Dr. Cohen was the first one. In 1986, Andy Kuffer, a volunteer who came from the Detroit area

of Michigan to help us pick tomatoes, had one of those providential experiences that affected the future of Blossoming Rose rather dramatically. One day he went up to Jerusalem, after several tiring days in the tomato fields, to assist with a small dig before heading to Tel Aviv to catch a plane home. While there he met Dr. Rudolph Cohen's assistant and during a brief visit, Andy mentioned that he had been volunteering at Kibbutz Ir Ovot and the assistant told him that there was an archaeology site at the Kibbutz that Dr. Cohen would like to dig.

For us, the timing was perfect when Dr. Rudolph Cohen, Deputy Director of the Israel Antiquities Authority, stopped in at Ir Ovot while we were there and told us we were standing over ancient Tamar. My life in church had made me aware of certain scriptures by Jewish prophets about non-Jews helping to dig up and rebuild ancient Jewish cities. I confessed that I was curious.

Dr. Cohen responded by opening the Bible to Genesis, where the story is told about Ishmael, Abraham's first son, living in Paran, just south of the Kibbutz. Then he turned to Numbers which went on to describe the Israelites camping at Oboth. Simha chimed in at that point and said, "That is Ir Ovot in English." Finally, he showed me in the book of Ezekiel where the city of Tamar would be the southern boundary of Israel in the times of Messiah.

My heart rose at the names – Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses, Ezekiel – and the ancient places – Beersheva, Paran, Oboth, Tamar. The very syllables hummed with "preparing for the Messiah."

"Restoring the ancient cities" began to look real. Dr. Cohen and Rabbi Pearlmutter agreed Ir Ovot was ancient Oboth, and the details seemed to dovetail into a story that made sense as to how we could help Simha survive in the desert.

----The Dental Clinic

In 1986 there was a definite emphasis on meeting the needs at the Kibbutz through farming, greening, and cleaning debris throughout the 55 acres. But there were other, more personal, needs as well and Simha brought it to my attention that all eight of the residents at the Kibbutz needed dental work. Dr. Don Longfield, a dentist from Kalkaska, Michigan, along with his wife, Sylvia, attended one of our early banquets in the northern part of Michigan. That was a risky thing to do because they would be the first people we would think of when Simha shared their family's dental needs.

All things work together for good, sometimes concurrently. The Longfields were "flying dentists" who had worked in Central America in the jungles. They had a new portable dental clinic, a purchase made by David and Heatherlee Nielson who had already stepped forward on another rescue operation, and they agreed to take it to the Kibbutz to service the dental needs. They also joined the Board of Trustees where Sylvia became the secretary.

Chapter Three

Archaeology – the Jewel of the Arava

From 1984-1988, our source for staff and financial assistance was Jordan College in Cedar Springs, Michigan. We wanted to have students study in Israel and, at the same time, help with the growing responsibilities at the Kibbutz. We also needed staff to teach students and protect our interests at Ir Ovot. These are the things that needed to "come together," as we

mentioned in the last chapter. So it was perfect when my sister, Delphine, and her husband, David Parks agreed to move to Ir Ovot for a couple years. My sister was a certified teacher and Dave was working on his Ph.D at Michigan State University.

Following is an excerpt from Dave's journal:

Falafels cost 75 cents and included free veggie refills in Beersheva, where no one said "ber-SHE-ba." After two or three French desserts and espressos, we floated on caffeine six inches off the ground.

Delphine taught a comparative religions course to seven college students, grew tender vegetables in a plot next to the kitchen, and cooked the dining hall evening meal. I interviewed tourists for a research project. First, we lived beside the tel in old beat up house trailers ("caravans" in Israeli English) and then on the tel.

Dave and Delphine became our "go to people" to make arrangements for our volunteers to stay at the Kibbutz and to keep our connections with the Kibbutz community.

There were a few other volunteers who spent several weeks or months serving as support staff at the Park and Blossoming Rose friends, such as Ned and Jean Keefer, stayed on for several months after the greenhouse was built earlier in 1984. Rev. Lowell and Gerry Harris, along with Jack and Marci Bickler, and Vernamae Eplett spent time assisting in general responsibilities of maintaining an ongoing operation at the Kibbutz. It was important then to establish a "presence" if we were to find a long-term meaning for our vision, mission and goals.

Vernamae wrote in her journal: "My first trip to Ir Ovot was much more than mere 'culture shock' and I thank God for Delphine Parks. I would go to her house when I lost my perspective. Delphine would listen and then laugh her wonderful - get a grip - laugh. We would talk and the world would come back together. She was truly a 'stream in the desert' for me."

We had built the greenhouse as an experiment to help poor families grow food in the desert, and we grew tomatoes and vegetables to bless the survival of the Pearlmutter family. Seed, fertilizer, and water cost more money than we had, plus, planting and harvesting in the Arava was hot, hard work. Just keeping students busy, meals on the table, and facilities clean, required most waking hours of the volunteer community.

So when Dr. Rudolph Cohen, known as the king of excavators of Iron Age villages and fortifications in the south, visited us in 1986, we were ready to refocus. Dr. Cohen told us Tamar covered seven times the square meters of Kadesh Barnea, which he excavated while Israel held the Sinai. He was convinced Tel Tamar would become important to the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and he called it "the Jewel of the Arava."

No one suggested Tel Tamar might be the site of the next Indiana Jones movie, yet we might have dreamed of uncovering a coin or a bone fragment that would make Dr. Cohen smile. We could not see much farther than our noses, but after much prayer and

consultation we cautiously wrote to Dr. Cohen agreeing to assist him. He returned a letter of acceptance that he would begin the dig on February 1, 1987. We were to furnish the volunteer workers and the money. We had very little idea what we were getting into, as usual.

The same sun that scorched us in the tomato fields now blistered us all day in the trenches. The dig, as promised by Dr. Cohen, had begun. At first we moved piles of dirt with pick and shovel. Then we laid these on the bank and dug with tiny spades the size of tea spoons. Many tea spoons all scooping in the same direction eventually heaped the wheelbarrow with sand and debris. Thus we prodded and pushed hundreds of loads of ancient dirt up the hill and dumped them in the wadi – in Michigan, it's a gully and in California, an arroyo. But Israeli words like wadi and swarma slipped in as easily as kibbutz or shalom.

In 1987 Blossoming Rose needed to find more people who could bring stability and continuity to the Kibbutz and for that reason, Daniel and Donna Clark were summoned from their home in Oklahoma and asked if they would become employees of Jordan College, where they had received their degrees a few years earlier, and move to Israel to serve at the Kibbutz. They agreed and made the move, first to Michigan and then on to Kibbutz Ir Ovot.

When the Clarks arrived, following the departure of Dave and Delphine Parks, they became the new “go to people” for organizing volunteers and working at the Kibbutz in between hosting volunteer groups.

Other volunteers who agreed to leave the comforts of home and join us on this adventure were some very brave souls. Many of them graduated from “diggers” to Board members. Kathy Bekes, Chris and Pam Kritcher, Michael and Sue Robinaugh, not only agreed to serve on the Board, but they became certified by the Israel Antiquities Authority to work on the archaeology site without supervision.

Archaeologists with the IAA supervised all digs, but they allowed certain individuals who took the classes they taught at Tamar, to do specific kinds of work without their on-site supervision. Kathy Bekes was the leader for most work done outside of official digs. Other Blossoming Rose volunteers who took the IAA's classes were Andy Kuffer, Rev. James Bugg, Merri Wentworth, Gloria Tennant, Pam Jaso, Tom Brown, Maggie Lacross, and most of the Willett and Gordon families. I got my certification along with all of them.

The first three digs in 1987, 1988, and 1989 all occurred prior to the Blossoming Rose staff and volunteers moving off from the Kibbutz grounds over to Moshav Id dan. Dr. Jack Rohr, Rev. Pat and Marta Flaherty, John and Micki Pletcher, Kermit and Jean Hainley, Rev. Bob and Mary Lou Swank, Larry & Miriam Borntrager, among dozens of other short-term volunteers helped to make the total effort worthwhile.

While Kermit and Jean Hainley used their psychology skills to keep everyone motivated and under grace, Larry Borntrager resolved every electrical problem that came his way. All

volunteers did whatever was assigned to them without complaint. Rev. and Mrs. Swank prayed for everyone.

We joked about striking the gold cup from which Solomon sipped the purple wine of his royal vineyards on the Golan. But instead we found pieces of a dish some slave had dropped two thousand seven hundred years ago. We tried calling them “shards” to impress Dr. Cohen, but these tiny chunks of burnt clay were not remarkable. What was remarkable, is that most of us never lost faith that some great things would eventually “work together for the good for those who love God,” or should we say – loved Israel”?

Chapter Four Issues Arose in the Arava

During the first five years at Kibbutz Ir Ovot, from 1984-89, when we worked in farming, archaeology, greening, and repairing buildings, issues arose. I had many discussions during those years with Simha about the differences between practices in Judaism and Christianity. As Christians, we wanted to help Israel wherever we could, but we viewed ourselves as the Gentiles of Isaiah 61:4-5, assisting Israel but not becoming converts. We had a great interest in learning from the Jewish people and helping them, but we didn't anticipate the issues that arose.

In those early days, we agreed to move Simha's synagogue, that the settlers had installed in one of the buildings in the 1960s, from what we called the Lower Village, to the British building atop the tel. This later became the only British-era building that remained to represent that period of time after the archaeologists completed several digs over the years.

Loading up and carting all the synagogue furniture to the British building was quite a feat. The bema, curtains, ark, and furniture could not be moved until the British building had been cleared of its contents and then painted. Our first Friday service at the new location was one of the good memories for us with Simha opening the scrolls and, his sons, Ari and Dari, reading the scriptures in Hebrew. We Christians felt it was like arriving in the Promised Land with Moses.

But after the inspiration of that experience, we bumped into the need to keep too many unfamiliar observances. Simha, as an ultraorthodox Jew, wore black clothes, a high black hat, tzitzit, and side locks. He did not work in the fields with us because he said his clothes would get dirty and because they were black, they would draw the sun. We understood.

There was a curtain in the synagogue that separated the women from the men which was neither comfortable nor acceptable to either the men or the women, but it was the kosher food laws that caused deeper problems. We did not keep the dietary laws at Ir Ovot, because as Gentiles, the rules for keeping Kosher were much too difficult while working at break-neck speeds to accomplish Simha's and our goals. We did our best to keep an open dialogue with our volunteers, especially with those who felt smothered by the rules and we increasingly looked forward to working with the archaeologists who did not seem to pay much attention to all the religious practices at Ir Ovot.

The fields were not farmed the third year after we signed on with Dr. Cohen in archaeology and Simha knew that the volunteers would now be directed by the archaeologists and not by him. While a few volunteers continued to help Simha, he needed more agricultural projects to keep the Kibbutz valid.

So, at about the same time, we became aware of a new group of people visiting Simha, obviously not farmers, who drove up in a Mercedes Benz and other pricey vehicles. Then we noticed changes taking place rapidly. Heavy equipment, D-10 caterpillars, and other earth moving machines arrived and the desert to the west of the Kibbutz was leveled and plowed. New irrigation lines were laid in our vegetable fields and in the new land to the west. Hundreds of beautiful fruit trees were planted by professionals. The Kibbutz was transformed from small vegetable fields, planted by us, to beautiful orchards with rows of miniature green mango trees.

The two men who made the deal with Simha to use his land were wealthy businessmen from Tel Aviv. One owned a big restaurant/bar on the Mediterranean, and the other owned a chain of gas stations. Simha seemed to have found his saviors.

There was a growing mutual understanding between Simha and us that it would be better if we moved ourselves down to the Lower Village on the Kibbutz property and not share facilities near the farmers. That move was delayed, however, because on the night before we planned to move, while I was asleep in one of the British buildings on the tel, I awakened to loud bangs outside. I got up, opened the door and watched as flashes of gunfire lit the sky. I shut the door and listened as the blasts continued and then it became quiet. Later that morning Simha said that the police had raided the caravans by the dining hall because they were being used by drug dealers and prostitutes associated with the man who had the restaurant/bar in Tel Aviv. We learned later that he was also moving drugs from Eilat, through Ir Ovot, to Tel Aviv for distribution on the streets.

It took over a year for all the orchards to be planted and during that time, we moved to the north buildings, across the wadi where the synagogue used to be located – the Lower Village. There was one large building we could use for a dining room and then several smaller buildings for housing. Knowing we would not be using our agricultural tools anymore, we gave them to the Kibbutz and paid Simha a rental fee for the north buildings.

Simha believed that the “right of possession of the Kibbutz land” was quite expansive and so when the government told the businessmen from Tel Aviv they could not expand their **mango orchards** to the west of the Kibbutz, Simha told them that they could and they believed him and planted. The government did not stop them and they invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the project. Water is precious in the desert of Israel and each kibbutz has an allotment. When Ir Ovot’s yearly water allotment was exhausted in the first few months with all the water needs for the new trees, the government simply shut the water off and all the trees died – every one of them. The man who owned the gas stations

died of a heart attack and the restaurant/bar owner went out of business. Everything was, once again, changing.