

State & Local

# Gush Etzion mayor looks to next generation

Davidi Perel is eager for area to be 'part of the State of Israel'

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NJN Staff Writer

With talk of Israeli settlement-building dominating news of the Middle East, Davidi Perel, mayor of the Gush Etzion region in the West Bank, hopes to change a few perceptions here about life beyond the "Green Line."

"Life in the Gush is very nice. We have nice houses, close to Yerushalayim with restaurants, shops, everything you need," said Perel. "You can work in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Gush Etzion. It's close to everything! And it's nice for kids to grow up in Gush Etzion. We have community centers and different *chugim* [clubs] — music, sports, swimming pools. And we have the best weather in Israel. It's not too hot in the summer, not too cold in the winter..."

Perel is currently on a speaking tour in the United States and will be in New Jersey Dec. 7-12.

On Friday morning he will be meeting with representatives of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ, of which Gush Etzion is a partner community, before heading to the Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School in Livingston, where he will speak with students and meet with educators.

On Friday evening he will be speaking at a private home in West Orange, and on Shabbat morning he will be speaking at Congregation Ahawas Achim B'nai Jacob and David in West Orange.

It is only a coincidence that his trip came as Israel announced plans to expand Ma'ale Adumim, which like Gush Etzion is considered by Israelis a "consensus" settlement likely to remain part of Israel in any two-state solution.

In a telephone interview from El Paso, Texas, Perel said one of his biggest challenges is to work out a plan to have Gush Etzion become part of the State of Israel.

"Gush Etzion should be part of Jerusalem and the State of Israel so we make sure we have a place to live for the next generation," he said. "We are going to try to build more houses to the west side [of] the Green Line so people would feel there is no Green Line."

He added, "We are trying to attract *olim* [Jewish immigrants] from all over the world. We think it's a good place for everyone."

As it exists today, Gush Etzion, a 10-minute drive from Jerusalem, was established in 1967, the fourth attempt to establish a Jew-



Perel: Gush Etzion a wonderful place to live. Photo courtesy Davidi Perel

ish community there during the 20th century. In 1947, the bloc of settlements came under siege from Arab forces, and was eventually evacuated. Since its dramatic reestablishment after the Six-Day War, its population has grown to about 40,000 people. The Greater MetroWest federation has supplied armored vehicles, donated emergency equipment, and helped renovate a kindergarten building and day care center in the bloc.

Perel grew up in Alon Shvut, a Gush community to which his fam-

ily moved from Jerusalem when he was two years old. At 42, he still lives there, with his wife, a midwife at Shaare Tzedek Hospital, and five children ranging in age from six to 20.

Involved in communal life for many years, he said it came naturally for him to be the region's mayor. His father served as rabbi of Gush Etzion and Alon Shvut. "It's in my blood," he said. "The history of Gush Etzion is that we all help." He has served as Alon Shvut's mayor and became mayor of the Gush Etzion Regional Council this past spring.

Perel faced some criticism earlier in June after the daily *Yediot Ahronot* published an article about Caliber 3, a shooting gallery and tourist attraction in Gush Etzion where visitors can take aim at cardboard "terrorists." The article quoted him saying that attractions like Caliber 3 would turn the area into a "tourist gem."

Perel said the quote was out of context. "I told them it would be a good place for tourists — meaning that tourists are coming not to see how to kill Arabs, but to see the region," he said. "But they want to put a good article in the news."

Perel has no security concerns at all about living beyond the Green Line.

"I believe if you're living in Tel Aviv, you face the same danger. Look at what happened two weeks ago," he said, referring to a missile fired from Gaza that nearly reached Tel Aviv. "There's no place in Israel that's more dangerous than the others. God sent us to live in Israel after 2,000 years of *galut* [exile]. One day, all the nations will be in Israel." ■

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Luna Kaufman surrounded by her grandchildren during her "Luna's Legacy" presentation at Seton Hall University on Dec. 2.

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Byrne told NJN.

"Following the war, I never believed anyone wanted to hear about the Holocaust or that I even had anything to say," Kaufman said as she received red and white flowers in commemoration of the colors of the Polish flag. "But in the process of teaching thousands of children throughout my life, I learned that I *did* need to speak up.

"This," she said, "is my legacy and vengeance."

Kaufman recalled her 30-plus-year friendship with Sister Rose and the lessons she learned from the Catholic nun who fought to increase awareness of the Holocaust and eradicate anti-Semitism.

"She taught me how much power we have and that, just as people can be taught to hate, they can also be taught to love," she said. While Hitler's actions "left our tree with fewer branches," Kaufman continued, "our roots are very strong and kids can grow up today without prejudice because we can teach them not to hate."

The evening ended with the performance of "To Remember It All," a cantata written for Kaufman by Cracow native Eddie Halpern in 1981.

Asked by NJN what words of advice she would give young Jews, Kaufman replied, "Open your eyes and be accepting of the world around you." ■

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