

Commemorating the Heroic Deeds of Female Soldiers at **Nitzanim**

By Mara Friedman



The group of girls—13- and 14-year-olds—had been chatting and giggling since they arrived at Kibbutz Nitzanim, located in southern Israel. Yet, as Talia, their guide, began to speak they quickly quieted down, riveted by her tale of Israel's fight for independence just 67 years ago. Sitting in a circle on low stones in the broad leafy shade of the trees, Talia asked the girls to think of what or who people look to in times of despair. The girls volunteer different answers, until one shouts out, "family!" Talia nods; it's the answer she was looking for.

She tells the girls about how at Nitzanim, in 1948, everything seemed lost. She told them how, just like today, the members of the community looked to their children to take hope and strength from their presence. Then, suddenly, the Egyptians were at the kibbutz's doorstep, and the danger was too great. Under the cover of night, *Mivtza Tinok*, or Operation Infant, took place and all of the women and children were spirited away to safety just a few kilometers inland. All, that is, except for three women who remained behind, ready and insistent on playing their part in their nation's fight for independence. None would survive.

Today, Nitzanim hosts an average of 20 groups a week of all ages. Visitors learn about the battle: The small remaining band of fighters at Nitzanim who gazed over the horizon to see 1,200 Egyptian tanks bearing down on them. Mira Ben Ari helping her wounded commander walk towards the tanks, waving a white flag. The Egyptians shooting her commander and, Ben Ari, in the brief moment before being killed herself, seizing the opportunity to shoot the Egyptian commander. Today, visitors hear her story and visit the spot where she was shot. A monument stands there, a large stone mass that might almost resemble a woman's figure.

Another guide, Ran Kochva, who is volunteering at Nitzanim before he is drafted to the IDF, says that he is always moved when he sees how his tour groups, young and old alike, connect to Mira Ben Ari's story. He recalled the time he took a rambunctious and unruly group of 5th graders on the tour, "but then we all sat in a circle on the ground and I told them that now we're going to talk about something serious - people who died, our history as the Jewish people, as Israelis - and they got it. Their eyes were wide open, listening, and once we got to Mira Ben Ari's grave they all put stones on the monument out of respect. In the end, they all connect to it, and it's beautiful."



The heroic deeds of Mira Ben Ari and of other female fighters at Nitzanim led to the development of the site as a place identifying with female soldiers and the construction of the Women of Valor Center in Nitzanim. It has come to be a site honoring all women who have fought for Israel in its history. JNF, together with SPIHS, developed the site, created a movie telling the heroic story, and is continuing to work together to create a new exhibit that will share the story with the public. Beyond the monument for Mira Ben Ari stands a large statue of amorphous yet unambiguously female figures guarding over smaller statues — The Memorial to the Jewish Fighting Woman, sculpted by Shosh Heifetz. Adjacent to the sculpture is a quote by Mira Ben Ari, who wrote, "I separate from my child so that he can grow up in a safe place, so that he can be a free man in our land." In this short sentence we understand the impossible choice that faced the women who fought at Nitzanim and across Israel in her many wars: to leave their children and fight, and perhaps die, so that their children might have a chance for life. Although Nitzanim fell in 1948, today it stands proudly as a testament to women who sacrificed everything for the fledgling nation's future.

