

# Gush Etzion

## Remembers *Its Fallen*

By June Glazer



ceremony at the cemetery in Kibbutz Kfar Etzion, where the heroic and final battle in May 1948 took place.

This year's ceremony, under the cypress and pine trees of the Gush Etzion forest, began with jets flying a missing man formation in cloudy skies over the cemetery plaza while hundreds gathered to pay tribute to local servicemen and civilian casualties of war and terrorism. The event also paid tribute to Naftali Fraenkel, Gil-ad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah—the three boys kidnapped and killed last summer—and Dalia Lemkus of Tekoa, a terror victim.

In the presence of a military honor guard, and with an Israeli flag snapping at half-mast in a brisk breeze, attendees stood in silence for the two-minute siren, then listened as area high school students offered readings and musical selections, and local dignitaries delivered brief remarks.

“On this day we need to stop everything and come together,” said Davidi Perl, mayor of Gush Etzion, who attended the gathering. “We need to think about the soldiers and people who died, and to stand with their families. We need to reflect on the meaning of their loss.”

The ceremony ended with the singing of “Ani Ma’amin” and “Hatikvah.” People filed out of the plaza in somber silence, passing graves dotted with small stones of remembrance left by visitors.

The Gush Etzion Visitor Center at Kibbutz Kfar Etzion stands as a national memorial to the heroic men and women who gave their lives to protect the communities of the Etzion bloc. JNF, which first played a role in the region's history in the 1930s purchasing land on which early attempts at settling the area took place, has joined with partners including the Israeli government, the Ministry of Tourism, the Gush Etzion Foundation, the Gush Etzion Regional Council, the Gush Etzion Tourism Authority, and the B'nei Etzion Foundation, to transform the current museum into an interactive center that will preserve the story of Gush Etzion for generations to come.

“In American history, the battle of the Alamo is the recognized symbol of bravery in the face of unbeatable odds. That's what Gush Etzion represents in modern-day Jewish history,” said Shani Abrams Simkovitz, executive director of the Gush Etzion Foundation, which works to raise awareness about the history and heritage of the region. “Every Israeli student and soldier comes to Kibbutz Kfar Etzion to learn about what happened here, and the government has declared it a national heritage site,” she said.



“I can think of no battle in the annals of the Israel Defense Forces which was more magnificent, more tragic or more heroic than the struggle for Gush Etzion ... If there exists a Jewish Jerusalem, our foremost thanks go to the defenders of Gush Etzion.”

David Ben-Gurion spoke these words on May 14, 1948 at the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. The transition period between the passing of the United Nations Resolution and the founding of the State had been marked by siege and battle, and on May 13, the day before the State was born, Gush Etzion fell after a three-day Arab offensive in which 127 defenders (21 women) were killed. In all, 240 Jewish men and women lost their lives in the campaign for Gush Etzion during the War of Independence.

Ben-Gurion credited the defenders of Gush Etzion, an area that has played a significant role in Jewish history since biblical times, with helping to save a besieged Jerusalem. As a consequence of the three-day battle, preoccupied Arab forces from all over the Judean Hills were unable to turn their attention to the city, some 12.5 miles to the north, and join the fight against its Jews.

Since its reunification by the IDF during the 1967 Six-Day War, Gush Etzion holds its Memorial Day commemoration