

Jews Aid Others in U. S. and Philippines

An Israeli Helps Green The Barren Painted Desert

By Marlene Goldman

Two years ago, American Navajo Indians doubted the promise of David Mazigh, an Israeli agronomist, who said he could transform areas of the barren Painted Desert in Arizona into fertile stretches of farmland.

But Mazigh allayed the Navajos' disbelief by producing fields of corn, potatoes, melons and other fruits and vegetables on experimental farms across Navajo reservations in Arizona. He earned their respect so much so that they named him Nihikaojeeh, a Navajo word meaning "one who comes to help us," and insisted on honoring him at a farewell party on a Navajo farm he founded 60 miles northeast of Flagstaff.

Between 75 and 100 Navajos and dignitaries joined the celebration, including Peterson Zah, chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, and Wilma Mankiller, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. The feast featured samples of Mazigh's hard labor: onions, tomatoes, melons, squash, potatoes and corn; the Navajos also presented him with gifts.

While Mazigh returns to his position in Israel as director of the Avdat Experimental Farm on the Sde Boker campus of

Ben Gurion University of the Negev, his replacement, Ron Scherzer, a 36-year-old expert in field crops and fish pond culture, will move his family from Kibbutz Sde Boker to the Navajo Nation for two years.

"Mazigh was very special and was not afraid to dig into the earth with his hands," said Lois Roisman, executive director of the Washington-based Jewish Fund for Justice, a national Jewish foundation which funds efforts that promise social and economic justice in the United States.

"He worked from dawn till dusk, side by side with the Navajos, and they treated him like a brother," she added.

When Mazigh first arrived in early 1985, he said that the Navajos didn't even know what Israel is. They could not understand why the Jewish people wanted to help them. "I told them Jews believe you love other people as you love yourself. This is my religion," he explained. "I think they understood."

The Navajos, whose 170,000 members comprise the largest of the 424 Native American tribes, are among the poorest people in the world. They were totally ignorant about the basics of farming technique, according to Mazigh. "They didn't know to give the crops water every day," he said.

"We needed to teach them slowly."

Mazigh tested some 120 different varieties of fruits, vegetables and grains, including 14 varieties of watermelon, pineapple, papaya, avocado, pepper, cabbage, almond and his personal favorite, pistachios. He is known as the "pistachio king" in Israel for his success with the crop.

Impressed By Israeli Methods

The idea of looking to Israel to aid the Navajos was the brainchild of Jacques Seronde, program director of the Seventh Generation Fund. "I was inspired by the book 'The Negev: Challenge of the Desert,' by Michael Avenari," Seronde told the JTA. Seronde was impressed with how the Israelis conquered the Negev by using runoff water and envisioned success using similar methods in the arid region inhabited by the Navajos.

Seronde, who is married to an Indian woman and whose grandfather was the late Christian Herter, a former Secretary of State in the Eisenhower Administration, has lived and worked with the Navajos since 1970. He traveled to the Negev in 1981 to study drip irrigation at Ben Gurion University's Blaustein Institute for Desert Research,

where he met Mazigh. When Seronde returned to Flagstaff, he convinced tribal and community officials to create the "Navajo Experimental Farm Program."

Grants were obtained from the Jewish Fund for Justice and the Ford Foundation, and Mazigh, who was on sabbatical leave, was recruited. "What he brought was a big heart, a willingness to work hard and a great deal of technical and social knowledge," Seronde said.

The farms started by Mazigh are comparable to the Israeli moshav, according to Seronde. "It's a cooperative village where families live independently and each works a plot of ground, but they cooperate for purchasing fertilizer, and tractors and in marketing produce," he added.

The success of the Israeli-modeled family agriculture has attracted the interest of Pueblo, Lakota, Shoshone, Hopi and other Native Americans. The Seventh Generation Fund, Jewish Fund for Justice and Ben Gurion University intend to expand the program further in 1986-87.

Will Try To Send Indians To Israel

During the winter, Seronde

hopes to be able to send Native Americans to Israel because he believes it is "important for people here to see what has been done in Israel." He also plans to introduce Israeli expertise to fisheries in the north and livestock in the High Plains.

"The social and economic conditions are disastrous on reservations and I feel there is a good chance we can adapt the Israeli model to meet Native American needs," Seronde said.

He believes the Navajos and other American Indians are now willing to accept help from Jews and Israelis because they have presented a visible solution. So far, Seronde has met his initial goals with the project. "The Israelis have added green to the palate of the Painted Desert," he said.

AJWS To Aid Filipinos

The American Jewish World Service (AJWS), the international relief and development organization, announced its "Plant An Acre" campaign in response to conditions of extreme hunger and poverty on the Philippine island of Negros, affecting many thousands of

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