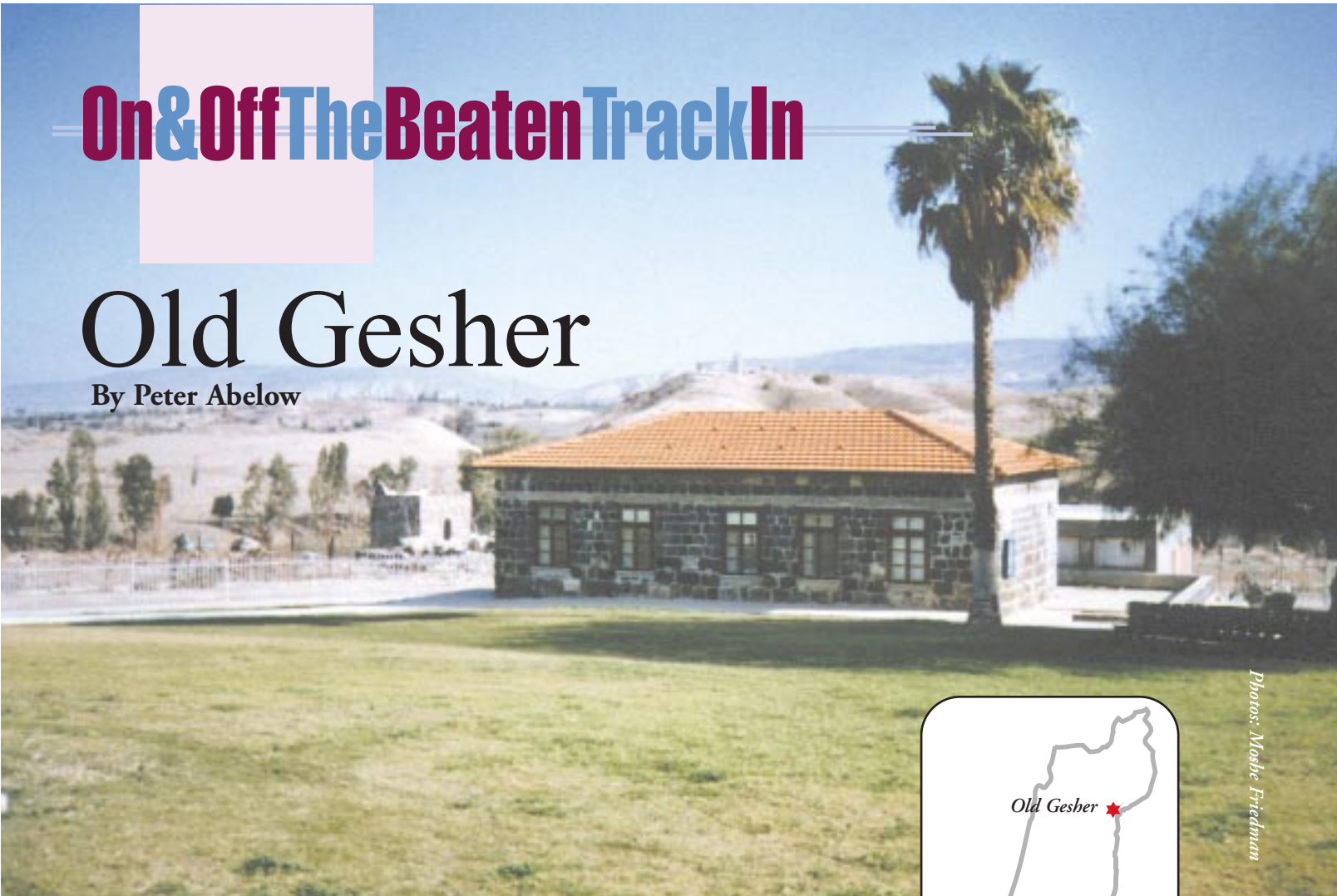


## Old Gesher

By Peter Abelow



Photos: Moshe Friedman



The restored dining hall of Old Kibbutz Gesher.

The nature of magazine deadlines finds me writing in November, during Chanukah, about Yom HaAtzmaut (Israel Independence Day) which falls in May. But upon reflection, one discerns a common thread between the two occasions: on both, we celebrate the miraculous victory of the weak over the strong, the few over the many.

Large miracles are often the sum total of many small miracles, and this was certainly the case fifty-five years ago, during Israel's War of Independence. One of the miracles that helped bring

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about Israel's victory occurred at Old Kibbutz Gesher, located on the banks of the Jordan River between Bet Shean and Tiberias.

In 1921 Jewish pioneers founded the kibbutz on a strategic plot of land on the bank of the Jordan River. Two bridges crossed the River nearby (some years later, a third was added.) The founders aptly named the place Kibbutz Gesher, which means bridge.

The oldest of the three bridges was built by the Romans about 2,000 years ago. In 1904 the Turks added a modern bridge to accommodate the railroad, which ran from Haifa to Damascus. In 1925 the British built a third bridge. (Remains of all three bridges are still visible today.) The location took on added importance in 1927, when Pinchas Rutenberg, an

engineer, was granted the rights to build a power plant close to where the Jordan and Yarmouk Rivers meet, not far from the bridges. The agreement gave the Palestine Electric Company (which later became the Israel Electric Corporation) rights to dam the rivers; in 1932 the completed Naharayim (literally Two Rivers) Power Plant began to supply electricity to both sides of the border—Transjordan on

the east bank and Mandatory Palestine on the west bank.

In 1939 a group of German *olim* settled in Kibbutz Gesher. They were joined over the next few years by “clandestine immigrants,” (those who bypassed British immigration restrictions) many of whom were Holocaust survivors. Kibbutz members found work in either agriculture or at the nearby power plant. In April 1948, with the British on their way out and the imminent outbreak of full-scale war, the 120-member settlement managed to repel a fierce attack by the Arab Legion. On the first day of Israeli Independence, May 15, 1948, the kibbutz once again came under attack, this time by a unit of the Iraqi army. In the face of what seemed to be overwhelming odds, kibbutz members decided to evacuate all the children. To avoid the possibility of children losing both parents, they further decided that the parent considered

more vital to the defense of the kibbutz should remain and the other one would leave. After emotional goodbyes were said, a group of parents and fifty children walked for four hours under the cover of darkness. Sneaking by enemy lines, they succeeded in escaping to nearby Ashdot Yaakov. Eventually they made their way to the relative safety of Haifa. In the fierce battle, which lasted from May 15 to 22, the Iraqis destroyed every building in the kibbutz, but remarkably, the defenders held the enemy at bay, and casualties were minimal. While retreating, the Iraqis destroyed the Naharayim Power Plant, the cooperative project that to many had symbolized the potential for peace.

After the War, New Gesher was built on a knoll overlooking the ruins of the original Kibbutz Gesher. Today, the latter has been transformed into a tourist site that tells the story of the establishment of Jewish life in the

Galil. Local English-speaking guides describe the ruins of the kibbutz and the bridges, only yards away. Your visit should include a viewing of the multimedia presentation in the restored dining hall of Old Kibbutz Gesher, a walk through a restored underground bunker, now a museum depicting life during the battle and the most recent addition, a fully functioning model of the Naharayim Power Plant.

Old Gesher is located east of the main road (Route 90), about halfway between Bet Shean and Tiberias. It is advisable to call in advance (04-675-2685) to assure the availability of a guide. **JA**

Right: Sign at the entrance.

Below: Remains of a bridge built in 1904, located only a few yards from Old Kibbutz Gesher.

