

FEATURE



Renewal in the South
Lizards and lilies abound in
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Lizards and lilies abound in Hof Ashkelon where, up until a few weeks ago, lay the remains of rockets fired from Gaza

Renewal in the South



The natural beauty of the South has overcome its war wounds.

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Photos: ARIEL BESOR

Pace has returned to the southern region. The sounds of battle have been silenced. From Holon to Huliakat, everything is calm. Only at night, as the light of the moon shines on the abandoned battlefield, can the jackals once again be heard howling, the crickets chirping and the wind whispering.... The last vestiges of war will soon disappear. The grass will grow and cover the torn barbed wire, the abandoned helmets and rusty ma-

chine-gun cartridges – all the marks that show that men fought here for their land.”

These words could easily have been written this week, but they weren't. Uri Avnery wrote them as an epilogue to his book immediately following the War of Independence. Nothing has changed since then. Not the machine-gun fire or the quiet that follows. It's been less than a month since Operation Protective Edge ended, and at first glance it seems like we didn't just go through a war. Once again the natural beauty of the South has overcome the damage it incurred during the war.

After driving just 30 minutes from Tel Aviv, we find ourselves in the dunes surrounding Kibbutz Nitzanim. It is the largest remnant of Israel's coastal sand dunes, covering four hectares (10 acres), most of which is included in a nature reserve. During the most recent operation, the area was hit by hundreds of missiles that had been aimed at Ashdod and metropolitan Tel Aviv. Finally the wild animals that live in the area can enjoy some peace and quiet and hear the wind blow again as they prepare their pursuit of their next prey.

It's a hot summer morning. Avishai Shlomo, the Society for the Protec-

tion of Nature in Israel ecological training coordinator, gets out of the car and begins looking for footprints in the sand. He tells me there's almost no chance we'll catch a glimpse of gazelles, since they rest in shady places during the hot hours and, like all the other animals, wait for evening before venturing out. According to Shlomo, the slither marks on the side of the road are not from a snake as we thought but from a gerbil that dragged its belly in the sand as a way to get rid of fleas.

The vast open space, where the cult Israeli comedy *Halfon Hill Doesn't Answer* was filmed, is home to rich