Regarding the Negev, the storied desert region that comprises 60 percent of Israel’s land mass, there is no uniform view among the members of Israel’s diverse society, said Yael Zerubavel. “Some people romanticize and love it and want to keep it as it is; others think of the desert as empty, boring, and hot.”

Zerubavel, founding director of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, devoted significant time exploring the Negev for her 2018 book, “Desert in the Promised Land” (Stanford University Press), which, she told NJJN, focuses on perceptions of the region as a way of understanding Israeli history and Israel’s perception of itself in the Middle East.


The Israeli-born Zerubavel lives in East Brunswick and is also professor emerita of Jewish studies and history at Rutgers.

Her book traces different visions of the desert as a symbolic landscape in pre-state Israel from the beginning of Zionist immigration in the 1880s to the early years of the modern state.

Following the 1948 War of Independence, most of the Negev became part of Israel. “Zionists saw the land as a metaphoric desert, and settlement was conceived as a way to redeem the land; redemption of the land means to build
settlements in the desert,” said Zerubavel. “This was part of the settlement ideology prior to the formation of the state, and Ben-Gurion took it as the primary mission of the state,” the ideal aim “to make the desert bloom.”

But not many Israelis shared their first prime minister’s enthusiasm in promoting the hot, barren desert as the place to settle, so the solution became to build development towns in the Negev for the immigrants pouring into the new country, said Zerubavel. The book also explores the relationship between the Jewish settlers and the nomadic Bedouins who for centuries called the Negev home.

On the cover of her book is a photo of Mitzpe Ramon, which she chose, she said, “because it shows exactly what I talk about in this book.” Now heavily developed, Mitzpe Ramon was started in 1951 as a camp for workers building the road to Eilat. It was permanently settled as one of several new immigrant towns established after Israel’s 1948 founding, “to strengthen the Jewish presence in the desert and to accommodate immigrants from Arab or Muslim countries,” said Zerubavel.

In her book, Zerubavel also covers the emergence of the environmental movement, which “brought a new perception to the desert as raw nature and advocacy to save nature from excessive settlement.”
Yael Zerubavel

Desert in the Promised Land
It was thanks to the efforts of environmentalists that the Negev’s Ramon Crater — the world’s largest erosion crater, designated by UNESCO as a world heritage site — became the center of a large national park.

“Now it is a protected site,” she said, “but before that all kinds of industries mined the desert land to extract minerals and chemicals to support those industries. It is a tension between the settlement and environmental ideologies, both of them defending national views, but defending them from different perspectives.”

The same conflicts that occurred between settlers and environmentalists over the Ramon Crater are playing out in different ways in settlements all over the desert, Zerubavel said.

Environmentalists argue that the Negev is being “turned into a garbage can,” while residents of urbanized parts of the country find it cheaper and more convenient to send their waste there.

Such sites as the Ramon Crater, the Dead Sea and Masada, and the resort community of Eilat have also made the Negev a major tourist destination, bringing into play the same contradictory ideas of the desert “as a place of refuge and spirituality and a place where people come to attend a festival.”

If you go

Who: Yael Zerubavel


When: Thursday, Sept. 12, 7:30 p.m.

Where: Douglass Student Center, New Brunswick

Cost: Free

RSVP: Advance registration requested; contact rsvpBildner@sas.rutgers.edu or BildnerCenter.Rutgers.edu

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