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A Drip Revolution Around the World

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When he was approached in 1972 by the founders of the budding Netafim firm, Rafi Mehoudar had no idea he would soon develop one of the most widely used irrigation technologies around the world.

"I said, 'I don't know what agriculture is, I don't know what a kibbutz is, I don't know what a dripper is,'" Mehoudar tells *The Jerusalem Post*. At the time, Mehoudar was a young engineer working on a pressure regulator for sprinklers. The founder of Netafim contacted him with the goal of improving the drip irrigation technology initially created by its inventor Simcha Blass. A partnership quickly crystallized, and - in conjunction with scientists at Netafim - Mehoudar went on to develop numerous types of dripper technologies over the years.

At Kibbutz Hetzerim, the birthplace of Netafim, the decision to pursue the development of drip irrigation technology came out of necessity.

"We had undergone a very difficult crisis," Netafim's co-founder and Hazterim resident, 84-year-old Uri Weber, tells the *Post*. "They call it the 'salt crisis' - they found many layers of salt in our land. Therefore, we weren't [producing] crops. We were very unsuccessful with agriculture. We came to an agreement that we needed industry."

After hearing about Blass's initial work on drip irrigation, Weber met with the inventor in 1964, and by August 1965 an agreement between Blass and Kibbutz Hatzerim was signed. In January 1966, Netafim was established.

"It was the first plant in the world with drip irrigation," he says. "This year, we are celebrating 50 years of Netafim."

While Blass's invention brought the company some initial achievements, it was not until Netafim recruited Mehoudar and his knowledge that the firm began its trajectory of global success that it continues to enjoy today.

"The drippers that Rafi invented came after the drippers that we used of Blass and his son," Werber says. "We thought that the drippers that we received were very innovative but [not quite good enough]. And Rafi brought with him dripper products that really were of a superior quality."

When Werber and his colleagues approached Mehoudar, the latter was a young engineer known for his work developing pressure regulators for sprinklers. At the time, the company was in need of improving the drip irrigation mechanisms so that they would be more resistant to pressure changes, temperature changes and clogging, Mehoudar says.

"They taught me, and after a short time, they gave me a wish-list," he adds.

Although Mehoudar has always maintained his own independent research and development laboratory, Neafim has the sole right for manufacturing and selling the systems that he has developed. As of today, he has 55 different patents for drippers, he explains.

"Today all the drippers that are manufactured are my innovations," Mehoudar says.

"Simcha invented the dripper, but Rafi really developed the dripper," Maidan says. He created the culture and aspiration in the company for innovation."

In terms of drip irrigation, however, Mehoudar stresses that it is still necessary to improve lower-end models and make the system cheaper and more accessible.

"Once you make it cheaper the potential market is much, much higher," he says.

Today, the company sells its products in about 110 countries, with 28 subsidiaries and 16 manufacturing plants – three in Israel and 13 abroad – Maidan explains. On average, farmers that employ the technology are able to achieve a 50% higher crop yield with a 50% lower input, he adds.

“We are dealing with really the most important thing in the world, which is food scarcity,” Maiden says. “What we are doing is growing more with less. I think that the strength of Netafim is that it developed itself from a small kibbutz factory to the No. 1 brand irrigation company in the world.”

As the company celebrates 50 years of activity, Maidan says his goals for the next 50 years involve maintaining the firm’s position as a leader in research and development and investments associated with drippers, as well as strengthening its role in new and emerging markets – such as those in China, India and Africa. While Netafim does have a presence in these regions, its position is still small relative to the potential there, he explains.

Maidan also emphasizes the importance of focusing more on commodity crops like sugar cane, corn and cotton. All the while, he says, it is critical to “continue to give the best solution” to farmers and enable them “to grow more with less.”

“Our vision – and I feel that we are not far from achieving that vision – is simply to transition most of the world’s agriculture to drip irrigation,” Werber adds. “When I arrive to some village in India or in South Africa or in Colombia, and I see the poor farmers, and how the quality of life is rising and how their crops are growing, thanks to drip irrigation – that’s my vision.”