

# THE Australian Jewish News

## Trees, the symbol of our growth

28 January 2022

Recent weeks have seen violent objections by Bedouin residents of the Negev to tree-planting projects that even involved uprooting of newly-planted saplings that were part of an afforestation project desperately needed in that part of our land.

The question of the relationship of the State to its Bedouin citizens (some of whom serve in Tzahal and security services) is a complicated matter beyond the scope of a column such as this. However, tree planting, wherever it takes place in Israel, is another matter with a history that goes back to the early days of Modern Zionism.

Tree planting is particularly dear to the hearts of Diaspora Jewry inasmuch as it is a way to express affinity with our land in what should be an apolitical manner. Who of my generation can not remember the way that for decades in the spirit of “na’aleh at Yerushalayim al rosh simchateinu”, there was a collection for Keren Kayemet L’Israel (KKL, the JNF) at every simcha, with details regularly published in *The AJN*.

To this day, tree certificates are presented to bar/bat mitzvah boys and girls and those celebrating other milestones. And the ultimate expression of honour to those the community wished to honour has long been planting a forest in Israel in their name. Hence over decades the Australian Jewish community supported many such initiatives including forests in the names of Sir John Monash, Sir Robert Menzies, Bob Hawke and John Howard as well as the Anzac Memorial Forest and the Australia Forest marking the relationship between Australia and Israel.

As for greening the Negev, that was the ultimate dream of David Ben-Gurion in his later life, a dream to which he gave practical expression by moving there on his retirement from his prime ministerial position. KKL tree planting there is the natural successor to his initiatives. It follows the success of the tree planting that greened Harei Yerushalayim, the Carmel slopes and so many other areas of Israel once denuded of vegetation but where we now take the existence of forests for granted.

Remember that Israel is one of the only nations in the world that entered the 21st century with more trees than it had 100 years ago. The woodlands and forests that once characterised the countryside had long disappeared as a result of overgrazing; with the final blow to the pre-existing environment taking place around World War I when the Ottomans, desperate for fuel, cut down almost any tree they could find except perhaps for olive groves.

Keren Kayemet L’Israel, the Jewish National Fund, was founded in 1901 to purchase land for Jewish agricultural communities, as well as to carry out development, reclamation and afforestation projects in the land of Israel. Already at the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in 1903, tree planting was initiated through the establishment of a special fund, the Olive Tree Association. Its mission was the planting of potentially productive olive trees on land initially purchased in Kfar Hittim, Hulda and Ben Shemen (the Herzl Forests).

However, in the immediate post World War I era, personnel of the Australian army that was so involved in the capture of Palestine for the British recommended eucalyptus planting in the then mosquito ridden Hula swamp area, hence the ubiquity of eucalyptus groves now found across Israel and even immortalised by Naomi Shemer in her song, Chorshat Ha’Eucalyptus.

Utilising money collected from Diaspora communities, tree planting continued throughout the mandate period. In 1927, the Balfour Forest was set up in the Jezreel Valley. In 1929, KKL began implementing a new undertaking – the planting of areas previously considered unworkable for afforestation including rocky lands, terraced hills, steep inclines and shifting sand dunes. Even prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, some five million trees had been planted.

Since its inception, Israel has been devoted to afforestation and sustainable forest management. Planting of commemorative forests accelerated. Beginning in 1951, at the initiative of B’nai B’rith six

million trees were planted in memory of victims of the Holocaust in the Martyrs Forest at the edge of Ya'ar Yerushalayim (the Jerusalem Forest) on the ascent to the city through Harei Yehuda.

The forests mentioned above as Australian initiatives are just a few of the total initiated by communities worldwide. Today Israel's landscape benefits from more than 240 million trees in forests and woodlands, although there has been some controversy over the environmental impact of vast forests of certain species, especially the flammable pine trees. Accordingly, current plantings aim towards more variety of native species.

Despite Ben-Gurion's personal initiative, climate and distance from "the centre" meant that for decades much of the Negev was left behind both economically and environmentally as Israel as a whole moved forward. However, in 1995 KKL initiated Action Plan: Negev which includes provision of trees for capturing dust and air pollution, for providing shade in Negev army camps, and for landscaping roadways and railways.

Park development within and adjacent to populated areas, embraces roadside park areas, scenic overlooks as well as recreation areas. Unfortunately the confluence of issues relating to land ownership (regarding which Bedouins and the formal land registry have very different views) and a perception that interference with these activities could achieve a negation of Jewish development in the Negev (which, of course, has been directed towards strengthening our hold on the area comprising such a substantial portion of the State) has led to the current situation.

Support for Bedouin activities undermining Zionist aims by politicians from within Israel's governing coalition has only worsened the situation

Sadly this conflict is not the first expression of politics over the environment. Arson initiated by those seeking our destruction has become a feature of summertime in Israel, particularly in the pine forests covering the approach to Yerushalayim and the Carmel slopes.

Unfortunately, even as the world emphasises the need for environmental protection with increasing rather than decreasing tree coverage an important aspect thereof, not all are committed to the fundamental Torah principle of "Bal Tashchit – not to destroy" which is actually originally expressed in terms of not destroying trees (albeit fruit trees) even during war and conflict. Would that an increasingly environmentally conscious world emulate what Israel seeks to do.

Source: <https://www.australianjewishnews.com/trees-the-symbol-of-our-growth/>