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A Situation: A Tree in Palestine

Liat Berdugo

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LIAT BERDUGO

JANUARY 2020



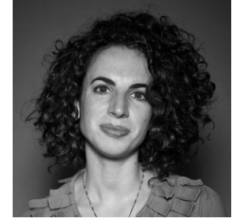
Jerusalem Forest, 1991. [Liat Berdugo]

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Liat Berdugo is an artist, writer, curator, and assistant professor of Art + Architecture at the University of San Francisco.

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Jerusalem Forest, 1991. [Liat Berdugo]

When I was six years old, I planted a pine tree in the Jerusalem Forest. I have no memory of the event, but I've seen photographs. That's me in the center of the frame, raising my shovel high like a tiny pioneer. My mother, smiling behind her sunglasses, carries my baby brother. My father has his arm over my sister's shoulder, embracing her and supporting her shovel at the same time. I am proud, independent, surrounded by family but not touching anyone. With my legs hidden from the camera, I appear to be growing out of the forest, both of us thriving in the strong Middle Eastern sunlight.

No one can say *why* I planted the tree. "We were probably looking for something to do with you kids," my mother offered, when I pressed the point. But it had to have been her idea; planting a tree was something foreigners did. We were visiting my father's family: my grandparents and seven sets of aunts and uncles who had emigrated to Israel/Palestine with a wave of Moroccan Jews in the 1970s. My father studied in Jerusalem, and I lived there as a young child, until my American mother called it quits and moved us back to Philadelphia. So this trip was, in a way, a return.

In another picture, I am scraping rocky soil toward the hole where the tree went in. The camera catches me in the midst of action, with ready legs and bent knees, but the shot is clearly posed. I was at the age where I agreed to that sort of thing. Now I look at this photo and ask myself the question that I am always asking, or else avoiding. *What is my responsibility for this situation?* A pine tree planted in the Jerusalem Forest costs \$18, a number that signifies "Hai" or "life" in Jewish numerology.¹ I planted mine in 1991, in the middle of the first *Intifada* or Palestinian uprising, and death — though I didn't see it — was everywhere.



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Jerusalem Forest, 1991. [Liat Berdugo]



When I say forest, you might imagine a large expanse of trees, a work of nature, enduring for centuries. None of these conditions apply. The Jerusalem Forest is a creation of Keren Kayemeth Le'Yisrael, also known as the Jewish National Fund, which planted a greenbelt park in the Judean Hills west of the city in the 1950s and '60s. The park was never very large, and over the years most of it has been cleared for housing and commercial development. According to its stewards, the Jerusalem Forest “now covers only 1,250 dunams” — about a square kilometer — and “still faces the danger of destruction.”² Loaded words, here.

KKL-JNF was established in 1901 to develop land for Jewish settlement in what was then Ottoman Palestine. It is now the region's largest private landholder, owning 13 percent of Israeli territory, and it acts as a quasi-governmental agency, building housing, roads, dams, and farms. But the fund is best known for its campaigns to rehabilitate “degraded” forests and plant new ones. With more than 150 forests under its management, KKL-JNF claims to have planted 250 million trees over more than a century.³ In the early years, Jewish foresters preferred olive and fruit trees, which had biblical resonance, but those species required a lot of care. So in the 1920s they switched to planting large stands of Aleppo pines, which grew quickly, required little maintenance, and “suited the European image of a proper forest” in the Zionist imaginary.⁴ Some writers claim pine trees were preferred for the acidic deposits of their fallen needles, which prevented undergrowth and deprived Palestinian shepherds of pasture.⁵ Whatever the case, these pine plantations are now prevalent throughout the region. Of the 400,000 acres of woodlands managed by KKL-JNF, only about a third are characterized as “natural forest.” Compared to the native stands of Mediterranean oak, terebinth, and carob in the wetter parts of northern Israel, the monoculture blocks of same-aged pines are susceptible to disease and wildfire. Only recently have foresters begun planting native broadleaf species.⁶

The stated goals of this afforestation program are ecological: to conserve soil, prevent erosion, reduce greenhouse gases, and enhance biodiversity.⁷ In the arid Negev desert in southern Israel, for example, woodlands were planted to create a “barrier” against desertification by cooling the air and recharging the soil with moisture. But scientists now say the four million conifers planted in the Yatir forest have caused more warming than cooling since the 1960s. As Fred Pearce reported for *Yale Environment 360*, the dark leaves absorb solar radiation that was previously reflected into space by the desert sands, and it will take about 80 years for those trees to sequester enough carbon to offset the warming effects. The forest, stressed by drought, may not survive that long.⁸



Trees planted by the Jewish National Fund on sand dunes south of Beersheba, >100 mm rpa (rainfall per anum). Photo © Fazal Sheikh, November 14, 2011. From *The Conflict Shoreline*, by Fazal Sheikh and Ezal Weizman (Steidl, 2015): These trees were planted between 1950 and 1952, when the Jewish National Fund resumed planting forests following the 1948 war. The area, between Wādi al-Na'im and Wādi al-Mshash, was part of the territory of the al-'Azāzme tribe. These years were particularly plentiful with rain, allowing the otherwise difficult task of planting eucalyptus and tamarisk in arid areas. The afforestation was meant to create windbreaks and stabilize the dunes.

The climatic benefits are beside the point, though, because the deeper motivations are cultural. The “image of a forested Israel has always fired the imagination of well-intentioned Zionists,” said Jay Shofet, of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, which is critical of KKL's forestry practices. Planting trees, he said, is “practically a Zionist commandment.”⁹ In the Israeli national narrative, the arid land south of Jerusalem is imagined as a “dead area” which became a wasteland (*shemama*) when Jews were exiled and now must be “revived.” The subtext of this narrative is that the Palestinians who inhabited this area lacked the skill and technology to properly cultivate the land. If Jewish stewardship is an ecological necessity, then Israel's territorial claims are legitimated and Palestinian resistance can be explained away.¹⁰ “What are the Palestinians?” said Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, in 1969. “When I came here there were 250,000 non-Jews, mainly Arabs and Bedouins. It was desert. More than underdeveloped. Nothing. It was only after we made the desert bloom that they became interested in taking it from us.”¹¹

So the planting of forests is a politically charged endeavor that links ecology and aesthetics to cultural survival. It is a way for Israeli Jews to say “we are here,” as one scientist told Pearce.¹² But more than that: it is a strategy for expropriating land. Prior to the declaration of Israeli statehood, the leaders of KKL-JNF saw afforestation as “a biological declaration of Jewish sovereignty” that could be used to set up “geopolitical facts.”¹³ The driving force behind that effort was Yosef Weitz, who led the forestry department from 1932 until his death in 1972. Not coincidentally, he was also the person who, in 1948, came up with the idea of creating a Transfer Committee among high-ranking government officials to expel Palestinians from land newly occupied by the Israeli military, and then to prevent their return by destroying Arab villages and building Jewish settlements. The founding of the state of Israel coincides with the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinian refugees, an event which Israelis call the *War of Independence* and Palestinians call the *Nakba*, the catastrophe. Weitz was centrally involved. Yet today he is regarded by official channels of KKL-JNF as the beloved “father of the forests.”¹⁴

Associating Zionism with trees, a symbol of benevolence and innocence, was a strategic move. Jewish literature often describes young trees as children, and Jewish children are sometimes named after trees (*Ilan, Ilana, Alon, Tamar*). Thus a six-year-old girl from Philadelphia who plants a tree in Jerusalem on summer vacation is understood to be laying down roots, growing a sustainable future, “strengthening the bond between the Jewish people and their homeland.”¹⁵ The cost to plant a tree is still \$18, the same as two decades ago, because the numerology of “life” is more important than keeping pace with inflation. And around the world, JNF affiliates accept donations from people who cannot travel to Israel in person. For \$18, you get a certificate that says a tree has been planted on your behalf. For \$180, your name is inscribed in a hand-lettered “Golden Book” alongside Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism. For \$1,800 it appears on the “Wall of Eternal Life,” a plaque in the forest of American Independence Park, not far from where I planted my own tree.¹⁶



The Al-Türî Cemetery in Al-'Araqib, 200 mm rpa (rainfall per annum). Photo © Fazal Sheikh, October 9, 2011. From *The Conflict Shoreline*, by Fazal Sheikh and Ezal Weizman (Steidl, 2015). The al-Türî village in al-'Araqib was first destroyed in July 2010. Those remaining on site moved their homes into the fenced-up area of their ancestral cemetery, which dates back to 1914. Outside the cemetery fence are several protest tents, distinct for their blue cloth, marking the area of the destroyed village and the area claimed by the al-Türîs. On the left is a branch of the al-'Araqib Stream (Naḥal Faḥar in Hebrew). Behind the cemetery is a small tributary dammed by the al-Türîs to create a number of small fields, seen here freshly plowed. Like all fields in the Negev, they were harvested in September, a few weeks before the photograph was taken. The earthworks around the cemetery were undertaken by the Jewish National Fund in preparation for the extension of the Ambassadors Forest. Planting is usually carried out before the rainy season begins in October/November. Since this image was taken, the structures within the cemetery compound, including the fence around it, have been removed.



In a 1963 short story by A. B. Yehoshua, “Facing the Forests,” a Jewish Israeli student struggling to finish his doctoral dissertation in history takes a six-month stint as a fire scout for the Israeli Forestry Department.¹⁷ He lives on the top floor of a stone house overlooking five forested hills, where he hopes to work without distraction. On the bottom floor lives an Arab caretaker who is mute because his tongue was cut out in the 1948 war. The failed dissertation is about the Crusades: a distant era of religious wars waged by Christians against non-believers, and against Jews. Notably, the fire scout does not write about the current religious war, closer to home, where Jews cannot cleanly claim victimhood. The Crusades symbolize a willingness to look at history selectively, as if with a partitioned vision.¹⁸

One day, a hiker comes to the forest and asks the fire scout, “Where exactly is this Arab village that is marked on the map? It ought to be somewhere around here, an abandoned Arab village.” The scout has never heard of the village, but he is curious, so that night he wakes the mute Arab and says the name of this village over and over, with different pronunciations. The name is not only unspeakable, but unpronounceable. The Arab (and this is how he is called in the story, always and only: “the Arab”) finally understands. He looks at the scout with surprise and points fervently towards the forest. His village is under the forest. The house was the Arab’s house. The village surrounded it.

On the night before the scout’s departure, the Arab sets fire to the forest, exposing the earth beneath. The scout does not report the fire, and the forest is destroyed. Authorities interrogate the Arab, but of course he cannot speak, and he is arrested. The author doesn’t give a reason for the scout’s complicity, nor indeed an answer to how many levels of complicity there are.



Abu Zurayq, district of Haifa. [© James Morris, from the series *Time and Remains of Palestine*]



A half-century later, it remains a public secret that at least 46 KKL-JNF forests are located on the ruins of former Palestinian villages. American Independence Park, where the names of foreign donors are etched on the Wall of Eternal Life, is superimposed on the villages of Allar, Dayr al-Hawa, Khirbat al-Tannur, Jarash, Sufla, Bayt 'Itab, and Dayr Aban, which were captured, “depopulated” of their 4,000 inhabitants, and razed by Israeli state actors in 1948. Nearby, in the hills west of Jerusalem, a park named after Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was established on land where he fought in that same war, land which had been home to 4,600 Palestinians in the villages of Bayt Jiz, Bayt Mahsir, Bayt Susin, Saris, and 'Islin. At Martyrs Forest, six million trees are planted in memory of the victims of the Holocaust; they conceal the ruined villages of Aqqur, Dayr 'Amr, Bayt Umm al-Mays, Khirbat al-'Umur, and Kasla. The list goes on.¹⁹

Employees of the fund have admitted to strategic forest planting as a way of obscuring traces of Palestinian life from the Jewish Israeli eye. Michal Kortoza, who supervised signage in the new forests, said in an interview with a right-wing Israeli newspaper, “Many of the JNF parks are on land where Arab villages were once located, and the forests were planted as camouflage.”²⁰ Camouflage uses texture and pattern to hide what might otherwise be visible, to break up detectible edges so that they blend in with a visual background. Camouflage hides something in plain sight.

And the Israeli courts have determined that when a forest is grown on expropriated land, Palestinians who return to that land are trespassing. In 2010, the Supreme Court rejected a petition by Palestinian refugees from the village of al-Lajjun to reclaim land in the Megiddo forest, ruling that afforestation justified Israeli control under the Land Acquisition Law of 1953.²¹



I called home when I learned those facts.

“Do you know that JNF forests were planted over ruins of Arab villages, to obscure them?” I asked my mother. “That’s horrible!” she replied, and she handed the phone to my father.

“Do you know that JNF forests were planted over Arab villages?” I said again. “It’s impossible to know,” my father replied. “It’s impossible to know what is really beneath the surface of the land.”

I hung up.

My father is the family member closest to Israel. He went to school there, voted there, worked there, fought in wars there, was married there, and buried his parents there. His relationship with the country has never been superficial. Why, then, the refusal to look below the surface?



Growing up, I learned to call the conflict (*sichsuch*) by its other name, the situation (*ha'matzav*). In modern Hebrew, “the situation” is often used in the greeting, *Ma ha'matzav?* (“What’s up?”). But it also refers euphemistically to the ethnonational and political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, which is steadied by the slow, suspended violence of the Israeli occupation and which periodically erupts into overt war. “The situation” turns the common meaning of a word into a polite reference for something else — something considered too ugly, improper, or harsh to be uttered directly.

The situation can be made present (as in, “The situation is horrible! All the fighting!”) or absent (“What situation? I’m drinking a coffee, the sun is shining!”). To say “the situation” instead of “the conflict” opens a space for denial, for a failure to see. This euphemism structures and

cements an ideology of ambiguity that is mobilized by the Jewish Israeli regime, as in the regulation of the so-called Present Absentees, the Palestinians who were internally displaced after the 1948 war. Under Israeli law, these *absentees* lost the deeds to their land because they failed to prove ownership with a physical *presence*, even though many were driven from that land by violence. An estimated one in four Palestinian citizens of Israel live in this paradoxical state of being, recognized and invalidated in the same term.²²

In one of my favorite films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), Israeli police raid the Jerusalem home of the mostly mute protagonist E. S., who is Palestinian. It is morning, and E. S. — played by director Elia Suleiman — sits in his sunroom drinking black coffee in his pajamas. The police barge in like trained combatants: each room is a new threat and their guns are drawn. Yet as the raid continues it becomes apparent that the police cannot see E. S., who walks calmly around the house, repeatedly placing himself in their line of sight. After the police have searched the rooms, they leave through the back door.



From Elia Suleiman, *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, 1996.

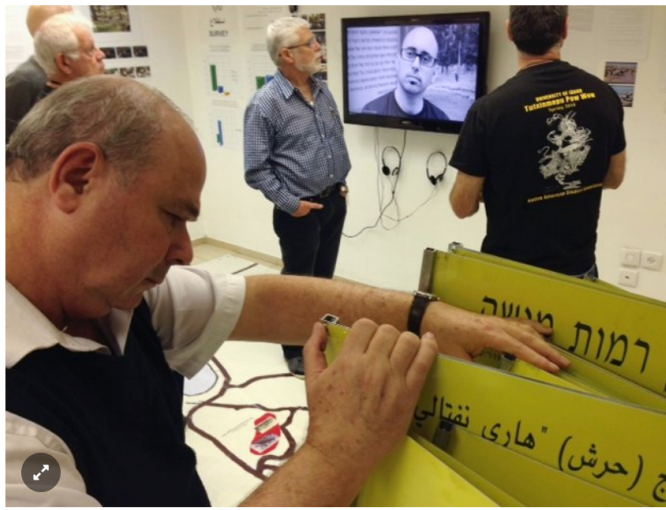
Next we see E. S. eating a bowl of pasta and listening to the chatter of an Israeli Police radio. Suddenly he hears an “Assignment Report” which presents a detailed inventory of items recorded by the police: “two front doors, four doors, four windows, a balcony, a fan, a phone, a picture with a hen, four seats, four old wooden chairs, a computer, a stereo, a desk, two wicker armchairs, a Japanese textbook, a painting with tulips, a white painting. ...” The absurdly detailed report even lists the authors on E.S.’s bookshelf: Sonallah Ibrahim, Raymond Carver, Karl Kraus. Finally, after noting the presence of “vinyl curtains,” the officer mentions “a guy in pajamas.” We come to understand that E.S. has not been invisible; he has just been ignored, unrecognized. In his ambiguous there-ness, he is not *seen* but *itemized*.²³



In Tel Aviv there is an Israeli NGO called *Zochrot*, or “remembering,” which promotes acknowledgment of the injustices inflicted on Palestinians in the war of 1948, as a first step toward accountability and reconciliation. *Zochrot* produces educational materials and hosts film screenings, conferences, and other events supporting the Palestinian right of return. *Zochrot* also collects oral histories from Palestinians who witnessed the Nakba, and shares information about destroyed Palestinian villages through maps, databases, guidebooks, and free tours. The organization has even produced a mobile app, “iNakba,” which allows users who visit Palestinian ruins to upload their own photographs and participate in the mapping project.²⁴

Zochrot sometimes seeks to compel formal acts of remembering. In 2005, it petitioned the Supreme Court to demand changes to signage in Canada Park, on the highway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, near the Israeli city of Latrun. Most of the park lies across the Green Line in the West Bank, on state land expropriated in the 1967 war, when the Palestinian villages of Imwas and Yalu were destroyed. The forest is now managed by KKL-JNF, which put up signs that noted the history of Roman, Jewish, Crusader, Hellenistic, and Mamluk settlement but ignored the Arab villages. For two years, *Zochrot* corresponded with KKL-JNF about creating better signage, but they were rebuffed. “The JNF does not view itself as dealing with subjects that have political significance,” wrote Leora Tsoref, advisor to the JNF directorship, “and therefore this should be forwarded to state bodies concerned with the matter.” Nine months after the petition was filed, and shortly before the case was to be heard, KKL-JNF finally posted signs about Imwas and Yalu, prompting the court to dismiss the case. But within two weeks, one of the new signs was pulled out and the other was vandalized beyond recognition. To this day, the fund does not mention the villages anywhere on its website.²⁵

Other times, *Zochrot* adopts the tactics of guerrilla activism, such as replacing Hebrew street signs with former Arabic ones. In 2013, *Zochrot* created a fictitious forestry organization, “New KKL,” which pretended to take accountability for racist forest planning. The New KKL debuted with a (now defunct) website and a lengthy statement by its invented chairperson, who claimed to have been so moved by Yehoshua’s story “Facing the Forests” that he resolved to create new signage acknowledging the Arab villages beneath its forests. A video following him on this journey was exhibited at *Zochrot*’s Tel Aviv gallery, along with a large map of KKL-JNF forests planted on Palestinian ruins. Visitors were invited to take a sign from the exhibition and personally place it in the corresponding forest.



The New KKL exhibit, Tel Aviv, 2014. [Courtesy of Zochrot]

Some people mistook the satire as reality, and the exhibition prompted legal threats from the actual KKL-JNF. But the Zochrot activists insisted that they had no intention to libel anyone. "On the contrary," they wrote, in character, "we wish [the public] to regard the New KKL as a gift, an opportunity to do good, as in: Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it. (Psalms 34, 14)." Zochrot invited representatives of KKL-JNF to attend the exhibition and sign a certificate acknowledging the Nakba, suggesting that it would look swell hanging in their offices alongside tree planting certificates.²⁶



I was socialized to plant trees through the Jewish holiday of Tu Bishvat, the festival of trees. As a child I learned songs like "The Almond Tree Is Blooming" (*Hashkediya porachat*), which personifies Israel as "calling out" for trees to be planted on every hill and valley, so that the land may "once again be inherited" by the Jewish people. The heroes of another song, "Thus Walk the Planters" (*Kach holchim hashotlim*), strike the soil and prepare the ground for seedlings that will grow to spread shade over "our naked land."



A KKL-JNF poster from 1950, celebrating Tu Bishvat: "This is the day to plant and be planted // to strike down a root // another year and another year // and here will be a grove!" [KKL Photo Archive, Jerusalem]

This presumption of nakedness resonates with the Zionist slogan I learned around the same time — "a land without a people for a people without a land" — which involves a deep failure to recognize the native inhabitants of Palestine in the search for a stable, rooted Jewish homeland. Anthropologist Julie Peteet has noted that colonialist endeavors often produce a lexicon of barrenness to speak of conquered land. Words like "uninhabited, virgin territory, *terra nullius*.. untamed and unoccupied" erase native inhabitants from the language, from the very foundations on which new knowledge is built. This is an act of epistemic violence.²⁷

At six years old, I didn't know about politics or nationalism or colonialism, let alone epistemology. I also didn't know about planting trees. I was supposed to free the roots from the pot with an X-shaped cut. I was supposed to dig a hole that was deep and wide. I was supposed to straighten the sapling in its hole and fill the hole gently, but firmly. *Did I do this?* I wonder. *Did I do any of this?*

In the photographs, the ground looks rocky and dry. "Was I even able to dig that hole?" I asked my father.

"No," he said. "I dug it for you."

What did my parents want me to experience? What roots was I planting into a landscape that I had left behind? What was the point of planting a tree if not to nurture its growth, and reckon with its growing?



I called KKL-JNF to ask if my tree is still alive. The woman who took my call scoffed, kindly: “The JNF plants three million trees a year,” she said. “There are no records.” Of course, the fund maintains records of land holdings and afforestation campaigns, but not of individual tourist plantings. Then she warmed a bit, and sympathized in a millennial sort of way. “It would be cool, but there just aren’t any records.”

Of course not, I thought. Maintaining a record of tree plantings would undermine the point of the endeavor: projecting a future Israel in which the forests were always there. I wanted to ask what else the JNF was not keeping records about. Instead, I said, “Well, who waters the young trees?”

“Volunteers,” she replied. “I’m pretty sure there’s a lot of volunteers. A lot of people.” I pictured throngs of teenagers assigned to community service, walking the land with watering cans. Or maybe foreigners, feeling the weight of the diaspora, trying to connect with their roots by tending Israeli trees for a day.

“Where are the seedlings grown?” I asked, grasping.

“I would assume they are grown somewhere,” she replied. “Until they are four inches tall.”

“Would it be possible to find out where?”

“I’ll place you on a brief hold.” She returned and explained, as if conclusively: “They are planted as a seed. They’re grown in Israel from seeds. They let them grow to four inches tall.”



Left: Golani nursery. [KKL-JNF Photo Archive, via Wikimedia] Right: Pine saplings, photographed in 1945 by Yaakov Rosner. [KKL-JNF Photo Archive, via Wikimedia]

Later, I learned that KKL-JNF maintains three active nurseries in Israel/Palestine, each serving its own geographic region. The Golani nursery in the north sits inside the Lavie Forest, on the grounds of the former Palestinian village of Luby, which Israeli forces captured and depopulated in 1948. The Eshtaol nursery in central Israel, a half-hour drive from Jerusalem, sits on the grounds of the former Palestinian villages Ishwa’ and ‘Islin, razed in that same year. The Gilat nursery in the south is the only one not established on expropriated land.

Seeds are delivered to all three nurseries from a KKL-JNF facility in Beit Nehemia, a small Jewish village established on the land of the Palestinian village Beit Nabala, which was similarly depopulated after the 1948 war. The trees grown at these nurseries are not just used for KKL-JNF’s forestry programs but also distributed to Israeli military bases.²⁸



By some accounts, only 40 percent of trees survived at the site where I planted mine. The soil was unfavorable, and the planters were novices. Nationally, the survival rate can be much higher (as high as 95 percent in non-drought years), since most trees are planted by paid workers who know what they are doing. I found those statistics in a *New York Times* article on an “arboreal scandal” that occurred in the Jerusalem Forest in 2000. The *Times* was following up on a report in the Hebrew newspaper *Ma’ariv*, which said that three photographs, taken from the same angle, proved that newly planted trees had been uprooted at the end of the day to make way for the next round of tourists. “If it’s true, it is a real scandal,” said JNF chairman Yehiel Leket. The trees had been planted by the family of a dead American teenager to honor his memory.²⁹

A preliminary internal investigation confirmed that workers had uprooted saplings, but Leket claimed it was an isolated incident. “It is a few saplings in a new site,” he said. “I completely deny the allegation that this is a systematic practice by the JNF.”³⁰ The fund suspended several workers and said it would establish a wider investigation led by a retired Supreme Court justice. It also threatened to sue *Ma’ariv* for libel.

To many Jews around the world, this story was deeply unnerving. An American Rabbi recounted how he had saved money to plant a tree with KKL-JNF. When you bought a tree in Israel, he said, it was an act of pure and religious faith, “like believing in Santa Claus.” That act now seemed naïve. In an effort to restore faith, Leket declared, “We can prove that every tree

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planted by a tourist still exists.” Of course, they could not. I made the phone call myself.

More recently, KKL-JNF destroyed a memorial grove to make space for new apartments in Beit Shemesh, an expanding city west of Jerusalem. The grove had been named for a diplomat, Chiune Sugihara, known as the “Japanese Schindler” for saving 6,000 Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust by illegally signing visas for their safe passage to Japan. His family members, who had helped fund the grove, wrote an angry letter to KKL-JNF: “How could these trees be killed on purpose? I suppose the memorial sign has been turned into trash by an unfeeling bulldozer.” The organization apologized and promised to plant a new grove in Sugihara’s name.³²

Scandals like these call to mind the famous 1964 film *Sallah Shabati*, which features a comedic scene in which the titular character is assigned to the Israeli Forestry Service. Sallah is a recent immigrant from Yemen, in a time of widespread racism when people from North Africa and the Middle East were considered dirty, uneducated, and too “Arab” by the European Jews who dominated Israeli society. KKL-JNF used the labor power of these new immigrants in its large afforestation campaigns of the 1950s and ‘60s, notably in the planting of the Yatir forest in the Negev desert. In the film, Sallah joins workers who are planting trees for KKL-JNF on an open field. A government official installs a sign dedicating the new forest to a foreign benefactor, who pulls up in a taxi with his wife, takes a few photographs, and departs. The official then trashes the sign and replaces it with a new one in honor of a *different* foreign benefactor. Sallah rejects this scheme and comically uproots each newly planted tree. These trees belong to the first donor, he declares, not the second one. He refuses to let the trees take part in a lie.



From Ephraim Kishon, *Sallah Shabati*, 1964.



To Israelis, *Sallah Shabati* was funny because it was true. More precisely, it exposed a truth that everybody knows but cannot say. KKL-JNF plants trees where they are symbolically or geopolitically convenient, and removes them where they are not. This is a public secret, in the sense described by anthropologist Michael Taussig: a fact “known to the public but which the public chooses to keep from itself through various cultural strategies and mechanisms.” Racist institutions are sustained by people who keep such public secrets, “knowing what not to know.”³³

Zochrot asks us to *remember*: the state of Israel was not founded on a naked land calling out for Jewish stewardship, but on land already inhabited by Palestinians; 678 Palestinian localities were destroyed in 1948, creating more than 750,000 Palestinian refugees; the majority of KKL-JNF forests are situated on the ruins of Palestinian villages, in an effort to cover them over.³⁴ These facts have to be rehearsed again and again, because there is a powerful apparatus that wishes to deny them. KKL-JNF’s historicization of its forests routinely erases Palestinian inhabitation, because to acknowledge an Arab village, to *recognize* it, would mark a rupture with Israeli nationalist vision, which seeks a forest free of consequence, accountability, or priorhood.

This is reinforced by many complementary acts of erasure. Throughout the West Bank, there are separate and visually isolated roadways that prevent the “possibility of a cognitive encounter,” as Eyal Weizman puts it, between Israeli citizens and Palestinians. A structured Judaization process has obliterated the names of Palestinian cities and roads and replaced them with Hebrew ones. And then there is the concrete wall eight meters high which literally blocks Palestinians from sight.³⁵





Anata Village, West Bank, Area B and C. [© James Morris, from the series *Time and Remains of Palestine*]

Of course, Israelis have not actually stopped seeing Palestinians. State surveillance makes Palestinians hypervisible, while at the same time denying their humanity. Weizman calls this a “one-way hierarchy of vision”. Israelis are empowered with the ability to see, penetrate, and document, while Palestinians must avert their gazes at checkpoints.³⁶ In some areas, the IDF has issued formal rules of engagement stating that soldiers may shoot-to-kill any Palestinian caught observing military activities near Israeli settlements with binoculars or in any other “suspicious manner.” Meanwhile, Israeli vision extends across watchtowers, aerial photography, surveillance drones, unmanned surveillance vehicles, and a network of more than 1,700 live security cameras patrolled by the exclusively female soldiers who serve as *Tazpitaniot* (“watchers”) at remote viewing stations.³⁷ The Israeli regime sees Palestinians, without recognizing them as political subjects and human beings.

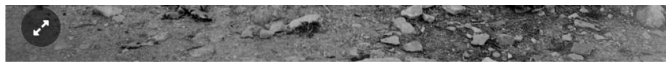
Legal scholar Nancy Fraser makes a distinction between *ordinary-political misrepresentation* and the much more severe *metapolitical injustice*. The former category includes cases when a civil society blocks its members from participating as peers or equals. A citizen denied a fair trial under law has been subjected to ordinary-political misrepresentation. Membership in the polity has not been called into question. Metapolitical injustice, on the other hand, occurs when a society and its government wrongly draw the boundaries of citizenship, denying some people the right to any representation at all. This is an injustice of a higher order. It is *meta* political. People are misframed outside the boundaries of the polity, as if pushed off the edge of a photograph.³⁸

This is the case in Israel/Palestine, where most Arabs are denied citizenship and/or ownership of their lands. The metapolitical erasure of Palestinians is so advanced that it is no longer necessary to enact a total visual obliteration. In the large Jewish settlement of Ariel, deep in the West Bank, a professor of architecture claimed that his students “see the [surrounding] Arab villages, but don’t notice them. They look and they don’t see. And I say this positively,” he remarked.³⁹ Seeing without recognizing has become the goal.

But if Israelis can see Palestinian villages without noticing them, why go to the effort of overwriting the villages with forests? This is the contradiction at the heart of the afforestation campaigns. The answer goes back to the concept of a public secret. Israeli citizenship involves “living with one’s complicity with violence ... participating in and sustaining social institutions of racism.”⁴⁰ But seeing without recognizing takes an enormous amount of energy, and so it’s easier if Palestinians are not seen at all, if the traces of their lives and settlements are covered by forests, so that the public secret of Palestinian priorhood can be plausibly rather than blatantly denied.

It won’t be this way forever. What a public secret is, and how secret it must remain, changes depending on who holds power.





Deir Yassin, site of a massacre in the 1948 war. [Associated Press]



What does the tree know about power? And what does it care? A popular song from 1972, “The Tree Is Tall” (*Ha’etz Hu Gavo’a*), asks why it matters that the tree is green.⁴¹ The deep sea doesn’t care. The flying bird doesn’t care. The only one who cares is the man singing the song; he sings because the tree is green. This is a riddle about human love for nature, and about nature’s indifference. The song ends with a twist — who cares if the man sings or keeps silent? Certainly not the tree.

Humans shape the landscape over time through inhabitation. They build homes and infrastructures and perform other alterations. They plant trees. Taken together, these works make up the cultural landscape. Usually the cultural landscape changes slowly, in evolutionary steps, but when one group seeks domination over another, it can be overwritten suddenly. This is the situation in Israel/Palestine, which has been violently de-signified.⁴² Still, traces remain in the physical landscape. Plants hold scars and other memories of damage, as at the village of Deir Yassin, where about 110 Palestinians were shot to death by Israeli paramilitary forces in 1948. The bullets pierced the prickly pear hedges behind them, and the cactus lived on, bearing the marks of this violence like a shadow or a ghost.⁴³

Shadows, ghosts: these are visual ruptures. A ghost presents as a shimmering break in an otherwise continuous field. It can be seen by some, but not everyone. The 250 million trees planted in Israel over the past century are part of a coordinated program to maintain a continuous visual field which includes some political subjects and excludes others. And I am one of thousands, perhaps millions, of Jewish tourists conscripted to join that program.⁴⁴ Maybe it’s appropriate that so many of the trees we planted did not survive. Our trees live on as ghosts which haunt us with a secret that doesn’t want to be kept anymore. ●

P

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NOTES

1. According to Stefan Oberman, director of communications at the Jewish National Fund, donors have been charged \$18 for an individual tree since 2000. Before that, it was \$10 per tree. ↩
2. Keren Kayemeth Le’Yisrael, “Jerusalem Forest – Nature in Jerusalem.” ↩
3. Paul Ginsberg, “Afforestation in Israel: A Source of Social Goods and Services,” *International Forestry* (March 2000), 32-36; and Fred Pearce, “In Israel, Questions Are Raised about a Forest that Rises from the Desert,” *Yale Environment 360*, September 30, 2019. ↩
4. John Stemple, “Viewpoint: A Brief Review of Afforestation Efforts in Israel,” *Rangelands* 20:2 (1998), 15–18; Hizky Shoham, *Israel Celebrates: Jewish Holidays and Civic Culture in Israel* (Brill, 2017), 80, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004343870>. ↩
5. Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (Verso, 2007). ↩
6. Statistics in this paragraph are drawn from Ginsberg, “Afforestation in Israel,” and KKL-JNF’s *National Master Plan for Forests and Afforestation* (NOP 22), 1995, which was updated in 2011 [PDF]. In 2016, destructive wildfires raged from the southern desert city of Be’er Sheva to the Golan Heights in the north. See, for example, Keren Kayemeth Le’Yisrael, “Map of Fires – November 2016,” and Melanie Lidman, “After Devastating Fires, JNF Skips Trees for the Forest,” *The Times of Israel*, December 19, 2016. See also Yagil Osem, Assaf Lavi, and Alexis Rosenfeld, “Colonization of *Pinus halepensis* in Mediterranean Habitats: Consequences of Afforestation, Grazing and Fire,” *Biological Invasions* 13:2 (February 2011), 485–98, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-010-9843-3>. ↩
7. Keren Kayemeth Le’Yisrael, “KKL-JNF: For a Sustainable Future for Israel” and “Turning the Desert Green.” ↩
8. Pearce, “In Israel, Questions Are Raised about a Forest that Rises from the Desert.” See also the research of Dan Yakir’s Lab at the Weizmann Institute of Science. ↩
9. Quoted in Pearce. ↩

10. Alan George, "Making the Desert Bloom: A Myth Examined," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8:2 (1978/79), 88–100; and Fazal Sheikh and Eyal Weizman, *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert* (Steidl, 2015). ↩
11. Levi Eshkol, interview in *Jerusalem Post*, February 17, 1969, quoted in George. ↩
12. Quoted in Pearce. ↩
13. Alon Tal, *Pollution in a Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel* (University of California Press, 2002), 75. ↩
14. According to a [Google search](#), the phrase "Father of the Forests" currently appears five times on KKL-JNF's website. See also Tal, 80–82. ↩
15. On the symbolism of trees, see Yael Zerubavel, "The Forest as a National Icon: Literature, Politics, and the Archeology of Memory," *Israel Studies* 1:1 (Spring 1996), 60–99. "Strengthening the bond between the Jewish people and their homeland" is one of KKL-JNF's stated missions. See "KKL-JNF: For a Sustainable Future for Israel" and "Plant a Tree in Israel with Your Own Hands." ↩
16. The Jewish National Fund in the United States — a distinct entity which has sometimes collaborated with KKL-JNF in Israel — provides a [menu of certificates](#) at various donor levels, most of them multiples of \$18. See note 1 for more. ↩
17. An English translation of this 1963 story can be found in A.B. Yehoshua, trans. Miriam Arad, "Facing the Forests," *Jewish Quarterly* 18 (1970), 28–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.1970.10704164>; and in A.B. Yehoshua, trans. Miriam Arad, *The Continuing Silence of a Poet: The Collected Stories of A.B. Yehoshua* (Syracuse University Press, 1998), 203–

18. Gil Hochberg, *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone. Perverse Modernities* (Duke University Press, 2015). ↩
19. Eitan Bronstein Aparacio, "Most JNF-KKL Forests and Sites Are Located on the Ruins of Palestinian Villages," *Zochrot*, April 2014. ↩
20. Quoted in *Zochrot Annual Report (2008)*. [PDF] ↩
21. Ruti Abraham, "Megiddo Forest Lands Will Not Be Returned to the Arabs" [in Hebrew], *News1*, January 5, 2010. See also Aparacio, "Most JNF-KKL Forests and Sites Are Located on the Ruins of Palestinian Villages." ↩
22. These laws include: The Absentees' Property Law, 1950; The Land Acquisition (Validation of Acts and Compensation) Law, 1953; Absentees' Property (Eviction) Law, 1958; Absentees' Property (Amendment No.3) (Release and Use of Endowment Property) Law, 1965; Absentees' Property (Amendment No. 4) (Release and Use of Property of Evangelical Episcopal Church) Law, 1967; and Absentees' Property (Compensation) Law, 1973. For more on language and terminology, see Julie Peteet, "Words as Interventions: Naming in the Palestine-Israel Conflict," *Third World Quarterly* 26:1 (2005), 153–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000322964>. ↩
23. For more on the itemization of Palestinians, see Harriet Sherwood, "Palestinian Children Woken in Night to Be Photographed by Soldiers," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2011. ↩
24. *Zochrot*, "iNakba App." ↩
25. Eitan Bronstein, trans. Charles Kamen, "Restless Park: On the Latrun Villages and Zochrot," *Zochrot*; Yuval Yoaz, trans. Talia Fried, "The Palestinian Past of Canada Park is Forgotten in JNF Signs," *Haaretz*, reprinted by *Zochrot*, May 31, 2005; "High Court Petition on Canada Park," *Zochrot*, May 2005; Yigal Mersel, "High Court Ruling on Canada Park Legal Fees," reprinted by *Zochrot*, May 2006; Yoav Stern, "JNF to Erect Signs in Parks, Citing Destroyed Palestinian Villages," *Haaretz*, April 2, 2008. ↩
26. The satirical New KKL website is archived here. See also Eitan Bronstein Aparicio, "Under the Forests," *Zochrot*, February 2014; "Comments to the Text 'Under the Forests,'" *Zochrot*, February 2014; "The Creation of New KKL," *Zochrot*, March 2014; "New KKL Signs Storage," *Zochrot*, March 2014; Eitan Bronstein Aparicio, "Israelis Acknowledging the Nakba," *Zochrot*, April 2014; Eitan Bronstein Aparicio and Moran Barir, "New KKL (JNF)," *Zochrot*, 2014. ↩
27. Peteet, "Words as Interventions." On epistemic violence, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 76. ↩
28. KKL-JNF, "Plant a Tree in Israel with Your Own Hands" and "KKL-JNF Tree and Plant Nurseries"; Aparicio, "Most JNF-KKL Forests and Sites Are Located on the Ruins of Palestinian Villages." Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), 294. ↩
29. Deborah Sontag, "Arboreal Scandal in Israel: Not All of the Trees Planted There Stay Planted," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2000; Suzanne Goldenberg, "Tree Scandal Takes the Bloom off Zion's Dream," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2000; Tracy Wilkinson, "Israeli Tree-Planting Group Aghast After Scandal Unearthed," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 2000. ↩
30. Quoted in Goldenberg, "Tree Scandal Takes the Bloom off Zion's Dream." ↩
31. Quotes from Wilkinson, "Israeli Tree-Planting Group Aghast After Scandal Unearthed," and Goldenberg, "Tree Scandal Takes the Bloom off Zion's Dream." ↩
32. Ofer Aderet, "Israeli Memorial to 'Japanese Schindler' Razed Without Family's Knowledge," *Haaretz*, February 14, 2019. ↩
33. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 15, drawing on Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford University Press, 1999). ↩
34. Aparicio, "Israelis Acknowledging the Nakba." ↩
35. Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 181; Peteet, "Words as Interventions"; Hochberg, *Visual Occupations*. ↩
36. Hochberg, 113; and Liat Berdugo, "Spectral Power," *Real Life*, August 22, 2017. ↩
37. Amos Harel, "Soldiers Can Shoot Gazans Spying on Netzarim," *Haaretz*, November 5, 2003; and Amos Harel, "Israel Speeds Up Camera Placements in West Bank in Effort to Deter Terrorism," *Haaretz*, June 22, 2017. For more on surveillance and the politics of recognition in a different context, see Shannon Mattern, "All Eyes on the Border," *Places Journal*, September 2018, <https://doi.org/10.22269/180925>. ↩
38. Nancy Fraser, "Abnormal Justice," *Critical Inquiry* 34:3 (2008), 393–422. ↩
39. Quoted in Weizman, 137. ↩
40. Kuntsman and Stein, *Digital Militarism*. ↩
41. This song is by the Israeli band Acharit HaYamin ("The End of Days"). ↩
42. Ghazi Falah, "The 1948 Israeli-Palestinian War and Its Aftermath: The Transformation and De-Signification of Palestine's Cultural Landscape," *Annals of the Association of American*

Geographers 86:2 (1996), 256–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1996.tb01753.x>; and Alan R. H. Baker, “Introduction: On Ideology and Landscape,” in Ed. Alan R. H. Baker and Gideon Biger, *Ideology and Landscape in Historical Perspective: Essays on the Meanings of Some Places in the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). ↵

43. Ariella Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950* (Pluto Press, 2011). Azoulay reports that about 20 of the 110 Palestinians massacred at Deir Yassin were shot in front of the cactus. ↵

44. Sontag, cited above, reported in 2000 that “80,000 trees are successfully planted by tourists every year, out of 2.5 million planted by the Jewish National Fund.” While the number has surely fluctuated throughout the decades, this report suggests that the total number of tourists who have planted trees is in the millions. ↵

CITE

Liat Berdugo, “A Situation: A Tree in Palestine,” *Places Journal*, January 2020. Accessed 29 Jan 2020. <<https://placesjournal.org/article/a-situation-a-tree-in-palestine/>>

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