When Green zones meet the green line

Political and environmental aspects of development along the green line in Jerusalem
Emek Shaveh is an Israeli NGO working to prevent the politicization of archaeology in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to protect ancient sites as public assets that belong to members of all communities, faiths and peoples. We view archaeology as a resource for building bridges and strengthening bonds between peoples and cultures.

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Introduction

Over the past two years, we have witnessed a proliferation of development plans in the green areas between Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem. The plans are focused on two locations: a) the Hinnom Valley/Wadi A-Rababa, situated between the neighborhoods of Silwan and Abu Tor in East Jerusalem and bordering on the Jerusalem Cinematheque from the west, and b) the Peace Forest, located between the Palestinian neighborhoods of Abu Tor and Jabel Mukabber and the Hass-Sherover Promenade (Heb.: “Armon Ha-Natziv Promenade”).

In both locations, we observe the presence of the same actors: the Ministry of Tourism, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Elad Foundation, and government environmental bodies (the area of the Hinnom Valley is within the jurisdictional realm of the Nature and Parks Authority, while the Peace Forest is managed by the Jewish National Fund).

In our opinion, the goals of development are political: to erase the Green Line dividing East and West Jerusalem, and to strengthen Israeli presence in East Jerusalem by edging Palestinians out of public areas. The development also has implications from an ecological perspective since these areas are all part of the city’s green spaces.
Hinnom Valley & HaShalom Forest

Hinnom Valley

Abu Tor

Peace Forest

Al-Farouk neighborhood
Jabel Mukaber

Armon Hanatziv Promenade
1. Hinnom Valley / Wadi A-Rababa

Location

The Hinnom Valley / Wadi A-Rababa borders Mt. Zion to the north, the Jerusalem Cinematheque to the west, the Abu Tor neighborhood to the south, and Silwan to the northeast. From a geo-political perspective, the valley comprises areas of diverse status: its southern section is considered East Jerusalem, but the north is located in West Jerusalem, and its center was a de-militarized zone (between Israel and Jordan) until 1967. Today, the valley is a green zone that serves as a recreational space for both the Palestinians and Israelis to enjoy picnics, rock-climbing and horseback riding.

Legend

1. Archaeological excavations Mt. Zion
2. Sambusidi Jewish Cemetery
3. ‘House of Bones’ Crusader burial structure
4. St. Onuphrius Monastery
5. Planned Pedestrian Bridge
6. Elad’s cafe

- Cable car route, stage a
- Cable car station
- The green line
Historical Significance

The Hinnom Valley area features tombs from various periods carved into the rock outcrops. The style of burial and the remains found suggest the oldest tombs are from the late Judean period (8th–6th c. BCE) and burial in the valley was continuous through to the Byzantine period (4th–7th c. CE). Judean era tombs lie on either side of the road that descends from the neighborhood of Abu Tor into the valley. A segment of ancient Jerusalem’s lower aqueduct is located on the southern slope of the valley.

During an archaeological excavation in the 1980s along the Hinnom Shoulder / Ras a-Dabbas, on the site of today’s Begin Center, a silver plate was unearthed, dated to the 7th century BCE, with an ancient Hebrew inscription of part of the biblical priestly blessing, to this day an integral part of Jewish liturgy.¹ This is a unique and rare finding that testifies to the continuity of the prayer tradition over thousands of years.

Along the southern slope of the Ben Hinnom valley is the Onuphrius Monastery which belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church (No. 4 on the Hinnom Valley map). The site is linked to the Christian tradition that identifies the valley as Hagel Dama, or the “Field of Blood”, the plot Judas Iscariot purchased with money he received from the Romans in exchange for information regarding Jesus’ whereabouts. Adjacent to the monastery from the north is a Crusader period structure (12th – 13th c. CE), known as the “House of Bones”, identified as a burial site for Christian pilgrims who perished during their visits to the Holy Land. Much of the structure has remained intact, including its arched ceiling and side-tower.

Near the monastery, family tombs dated to the first century CE are carved in the rock. These are elaborate coves, comprising a number of chambers, with “loculi” or burial niches. These structures and the ossuaries found in them (boxes made of soft limestone) indicate Jewish burial practices in the Jerusalem area during the Second Temple period. The inscriptions found in a number of caves and ossuaries reinforce this hypothesis. The magnificence of the tombs and their location on the slope testify to the centrality of the city of Jerusalem and the Temple during this period. Pilgrims from across the ancient world came to Jerusalem, and the wealthy among them invested large sums in purchasing burial plots and hewing elaborate family tombs.² These tombs served family members over several generations. Some of them bear inscriptions, including names indicating that those

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buried therein were from outside of Jerusalem, as illustrated, for example, by the cave of the Ariston family, who originated in Apamea, Syria.

It appears the residents of the city continued to use the ancient tombs in the late Roman period (2nd-3rd c. CE) and in the Byzantine period (4th-7th c. CE) during which times newer tombs were also dug alongside the older ones and were characterized by arches carved into the tomb walls. In the Hinnom Shoulder / Ras a-Dabbous, remnants of cremation burial were found suggesting that the site was also used to bury Roman soldiers or clerks from the Western part of the Roman Empire, where cremation burial was common.

On the slope descending from the Mt. Zion Hotel is the fenced Jerusalem Karaite Cemetery. The grounds serve the Karaite community who arrived in Jerusalem in the 10th century and lived in the city until the 20th. On the other side of the Hinnom Valley, along the slopes of Mt. Zion, is the cemetery known as Sambuski. During the Ottoman period, it served the city’s impoverished Jews. Today, the cemetery is fenced off and has fallen into disuse.

3. Avni & Greenhut, 1996 (above, note 2).
Changes in the Hinnom Valley / Wadi a-Rababa

In 1974, the valley was declared part of the Jerusalem Walls National Park. As a result, every building plan requires approval of the Nature and Parks Authority. This has effectively prevented construction and the area remained a charming pastoral enclave. In the west the valley features cultivated lawns and its eastern section is full of fruit-bearing trees.

In the early 2000s, the valley began to change when the Nature and Parks Authority, and later, the Elad Foundation, started developing several sites. In 2007–2008, for example, Elad commissioned an archaeological excavation on the slopes of Mt. Zion adjacent to the Catholic Cemetery of St. Peter in Gallicantu (No. 1 on the Hinnom Valley Map). The goal of the excavation was to build a promenade initiated by the Nature and Parks Authority. It is not clear why a private organization funded archaeological excavations in a public space zoned for a government project.

In 2010, the project of documenting and restoring the Jewish Sambuski Cemetery, located on the slopes of Mt. Zion, adjacent to homes in Silwan, was launched (No. 2 on the Hinnom Valley Map). Elad took part in financing the study. In 2011, the Israel Antiquities Authority carried out extensive preservation work on the aforementioned Crusader building known as the “House of Bones” (No. 3 on the Hinnom Valley Map) on the other side of the valley. These were isolated projects that contributed to the preservation of the antiquities and the landscape, but since 2017, new developments of a more drastic measure have been initiated in the area including a suspension bridge, a cable car to the Old City, a café and performance center, and landscape development on plots privately owned by Palestinian residents. All of these projects contribute to a process of taking control of and reshaping the character of the Ben Hinnom valley.

5. Y. Zellinger, “Jerusalem, Mt. Zion Slope,” Hadashot Archeologiot, 122 (Heb.).
7. “Haqel Dama: Conservation of the Crusader-Period Burial Structure,” Conservation Administration, Antiquities Authority (Heb.).
Suspension Bridge

In March 2016, the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA) requested a building permit to build a bridge approximately 180 m. in length, which would be suspended 35 m. over the Hinnom Valley (No. 5 Hinnom Valley Map). The bridge is intended to connect a plot on the southern bank of the valley, that is currently under the control of the Elad Foundation, with the southern slopes of Mt. Zion. The municipality’s planning committee chose to advance the bridge by requesting a permit, thereby bypassing the need for advertising the plan to solicit objections and public discussion, even though the monumental structure is to be located in the heart of the visible space of the Old City. The construction of the bridge would be a noticeable change to the landscape of the Hinnom Valley. The bridge would be suspended from a location next to the Elad-run café, known as “The House in the Valley,” opened in the summer of 2019 (for more, see below), near the homes of the Palestinians in the Abu Tor neighborhood.

Peace Now and Emek Shaveh, represented by Atty. Qais Nasser, have submitted a petition to the Regional Planning and Building Appeals Committee against the decision by the local committee in Jerusalem to approve the construction of the suspension bridge using a building permit procedure.

Cable Car to the Old City

The cable car is a national project decided upon in a government meeting on Jerusalem Day in May of 2017. In June 2019, the National Infrastructure Committee approved the cable car to the Old City. The project is part of the strategy to reroute traffic to the historic area and multiply the number of visitors to archaeological sites controlled by the settlers. The cable car is intended to transport thousands of people every day from West Jerusalem’s Bak’a neighborhood to the rooftop of the Kedem Center in Silwan/City of David, a planned tourist hub promoted by the Elad Foundation. The cable car project enjoys the active support of Tourism Minister Yariv Levin and of the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA), which belongs in part to the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage headed by Ze’ev Elkin, and in part to the Jerusalem municipality.

The cable car will traverse the Hinnom Valley, located south of the Old City, with a stop at Mt. Zion, then sail over the residential neighborhood of Silwan, ending at the Kedem Compound. Visitors to the compound will be directed to the Old City through the City of David, which is controlled by Elad, and to the Davidson Center, an archaeological park at the foot of the Temple Mount / al-Haram a-Sharif. The second phase of the project (which has not yet been through an approval process) will entail a stop on Mount Olives, and another stop on the Pool of Siloam at the southern tip of Wadi Hilweh road in Silwan. In May 2018, the government allocated 200 million shekels for the first stage of the project.

For more information: The Cable Car to Jerusalem’s Old City: Who Gains and Who Loses?
Gardening Orders

From 2018-2019, the Jerusalem Municipality issued two gardening orders for 27 plots in the Hinnom Valley / Wadi Rababa belonging to Silwan and Abu Tor residents, in an area of approximately 60 dunams. According to the law, the municipality is authorized to issue temporary orders in order – for a limited period – to allocate unused private lands for a public purpose, such as the creation of parking areas, public parks and the like. In this case, the order notices posted in the area stated that “obtaining a building permit authorizes the owners to receive the plot,” but the owners were unable to secure such permits since the plots were located within a declared national park, and building is prohibited on national park lands. Accordingly, this is effectively a case of confiscation.

The order notices further stated that as part of the construction work, “geotechnical strips and landscape development, hiking paths and seating areas” would be created. In other words, rather than serve the residents, the city intends to use the area for tourism development intended to bolster Israeli control over the valley. A large portion of the gardening orders were issued for areas immediately adjacent to Elad’s café and the planned suspension bridge.

The House in the Valley

During the summer of 2019, Elad opened a café at the foot of Palestinian Abu Tor, at the edge of the Jerusalem Walls National Park (No. 6 on the Hinnom Valley map). The café building is located on the seam between Abu Tor and the neighborhood boys’ school, and the green zones within the national park.

The owners of the land under Elad’s control initiated a lawsuit in the Jerusalem Magistrates Court to force Elad to leave the site they claim the foundation was trespassing upon. The Elad Foundation claims that it had purchased the land, but the landowners claim that they had never sold it, and that Elad did not purchase it from the rightful owners.

In order to promote tourism in the area, Elad joined forces with the Zappa Club, a chain of music venues in Israel, and together organized a series of performances at the café by leading Israeli singers. A protest campaign by Free Jerusalem, led some of the artists to withdraw their participation.

Political and Environmental Impact on the Hinnom Valley / Wadi Rababa

The development initiated in the Hinnom Valley follows exactly the same pattern as the settlement in Silwan whereby archaeology and heritage are recruited to seize control over land. The development of the valley is part of the attempt to change the character of the Old City basin.

Over the years, the Jerusalem Development Authority, the Elad Foundation, the Nature and Parks Authority and other government bodies advanced isolated development and conservation projects on both sides of the valley. Now, however, as can be seen from the development plans from 2016–2019, taking control of the area is pursued through gardening orders and massive construction.
2. Peace Forest

Location

The Peace Forest was planted in 1968 by the Jewish National Fund on the slope between the Hass-Sherover Promenade and the Palestinian neighborhoods of Jabel Mukabber and Abu Tor. A large portion of the forest constituted a demilitarized zone between Israel and Jordan between 1948–1967, while the rest is situated in East Jerusalem.
**Historical Importance**

The archaeological landscape on the slopes of the Peace Forest is familiar to us from the Hinnom Valley: Burial caves and tombs dated to the early Roman / Second Temple period, and remains of an aqueduct that carried water from the Bethlehem area to Jerusalem. In the Ben Hinnom valley the tombs are the central archaeological feature, whereas in the Peace Forest the aqueduct known as the “Hasmonean Aqueduct” is prominent.

The Hasmonean Aqueduct is located near the Hass-Sherover Promenade and the UN Compound (No. 1 on the Peace Forest Map). A segment of the aqueduct, approximately 400 meters long, is open to the public. The entrance to the aqueduct is located in the Israeli neighborhood of Armon Hanatsiv (built on lands annexed by Jerusalem after 1967), while the exit is in the territory of the Palestinian village of Jabel Mukabber. Between the two is the Hass-Sherover Promenade. The portion of the aqueduct that was exposed is apparently a part of the lower aqueduct that carried water to Jerusalem from the Bethlehem region. Its dating is a matter of controversy. Some scholars date its construction to the 2nd c. BCE (Hasmonean period) while others date it later, to the 1st or 2nd c. CE (Roman period). The aqueduct remained in use in later times, until the Ottoman period.

Tombs – Most of the tombs known to us from the slope beneath the Hass-Sherover Promenade are complexes dated to the Second Temple Period. These tombs were hewn out of the rock and formed a central cave with ossuary niches branching out to the sides. Aramaic inscriptions and geometric ornamentations were discovered in some of the ossuaries.

**Changes in the Peace Forest**

For several years, Elad administered two sites at opposite ends of the Peace forest:

An aqueduct in the southeastern section. It was excavated by the Israel Antiquities Authority, and in the 1990s underwent conservation. From 2005 the site has been administered by Elad, and visits, for groups only, must be coordinated in advance through the City of David website.

In the northwest is the Elad tourism compound, which since 2005 has been the starting point for Segway tours and the location for the sifting and storage of soil from excavations in Silwan-City of David (No. 2 on the Peace Forest Map). The sifting project was one of the main tourism activities in the Peace Forest.

These two sites are located on the seam line between Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods. The aqueduct is between the Armon Ha-Natziv neighborhood and Jabel Mukabber, and the soil-sifting compound in the Peace Forest is adjacent to Abu Tor, whose eastern portion is Palestinian while its western is Israeli. Like the Hinnom Valley, the processes of development and alteration of the space in these sites have been gaining momentum in recent years.

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The Largest Zipline in the Middle East

In early 2018, the Jerusalem Municipality issued a permit for the construction of a zipline almost 800 m. long from the Hass-Sherover Promenade extending to the Elad tourism compound in the Peace Forest (No. 3 on Peace Forest Map). The permit met with opposition by the Jewish National Fund, since it was planned to pass through and above the forest. The obstacle of establishing a commercial zipline in an area zoned as a “forest” led to a discussion in the Regional Planning Committee, in which the municipality requested to change the zoning definition from “forest” to “open public area.”

Zoning Change

The Peace Forest extends over an area of approximately 400 dunam, and according to the National Forest Outline Plan, it is defined as a forest (NOP 22). The significance of the definition is that the area is protected from development and zoned for preservation as a forest for the benefit of the public. Responsibility for it rests with the Jewish National Fund. A change in zoning is a complex procedure requiring the agreement of the relevant authorities and the National Planning and Building Council. This notwithstanding, at the end of March 2019 in a discussion of the Regional Planning and Building Committee, the municipality requested a change in the zoning of the area. The committee did not approve the change, and it appears that discussions on the topic will continue over the coming period.

Beit Shatz

Beit Shatz is the name of a private home purchased by Elad in 2010 in the Jabel Mukabber neighborhood (No. 4 on the Peace Forest Map), from where the zipline is planned to originate on its way to the tourism compound. In 2019, the Tourism Ministry and the Jerusalem Municipality allocated 43 million shekels for development of the structure for tourism.

In October 2019, renovations on the structure began. The structure was demolished from the bottom up, and its rebuilding commenced.

The Tourism Compound

In October 2019, the first Jerusalem camping ground was inaugurated (No. 2 on Peace Forest Map). As noted above, the compound has been used for over a decade as a starting point for Elad’s Segway tours and for the sifting of soil from archaeological excavations in Silwan. The sifting is part of the educational activity carried out by teenagers, participants in post-high school pre-military programs etc. The Israel Government Tourist Corporation funded the camping grounds to the sum of 3 million shekels, but it will be managed by the Elad Foundation (which will also benefit from the anticipated profits).

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11. Jerusalem Forest: Change from Open Public Area to Forest According to NOP 22, Plan 10188.
Political and Environmental Impact on the Peace Forest

Combining a visit to the aqueduct which includes walking through an underground tunnel, with the planned zipline above the Peace Forest is reminiscent of the settlers’ practices in Silwan: Tunnels beneath houses and the advancement of the cable car to the Old City. The sky and the underground are recruited to serve the goal of political change.

The Jerusalem Municipality, the Tourism Ministry and the Israel Lands Authority support Elad’s development plan for the forest. In the guise of tourism development and the operation of leisure and recreational sites in the forest, the authorities are enabling Elad to initiate and implement projects that will change the landscape of the Hass–Sherover Promenade. The green view planted in 1968 will be gradually replaced with tourist attractions. Every plan will be presented from the outset as one that benefits visitors, while the anticipated changes suggest that the Israeli government and Elad have set for themselves the goal of strengthening Israeli hold on the open spaces between the neighborhoods of Jabel Mukabber and Abu Tor.

Conclusions

The political reality following the Six Day War created green zones between Jerusalem’s Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods. The Jerusalem Walls National Park is located on the lands of the neighborhoods of Silwan and Abu Tor, and the Peace Forest, on the lands of the neighborhoods of Abu Tor and Jabel Mukabber.

These areas are not frequented by the city’s residents due to their location between the east and west of the city. What began a decade ago as a slow process of taking control of specific sites for touristic development by Elad has developed over recent years into an intense entrepreneurial undertaking.

The kind of projects under development show that the priority of the organizations active in the area is not heritage nor the conservation of antiquities and the public space, but, rather, political considerations underlie these projects. The aim is to intensify Israeli presence, erase the Green Line, both psychologically and physically, and edge the Palestinians out.

The tools used by the settlers and the authorities are familiar from Silwan/City of David and in other places across the West Bank and East Jerusalem: The conservation and development of heritage sites, the creation of tourist attractions, the organization of tours through ancient water channels and tunnels, and experiences of journeying through the air. The zipline project is reminiscent of the cable car above the houses, against the skyline.

Now that they have entrenched their home-base in Silwan and solidified the settlements on the Mt. of Olives, in Sheikh Jarrah and in other places, the authorities and the settlers have moved on to two additional areas between West and East Jerusalem to create a continuous belt of change in the Old City basin.