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Rebel with an environmental cause

[IN JERUSALEM Edition]

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Avraham Shaked is proud to stand in the way of progress

Avraham Shaked has tried to prevent people from enjoying a quiet picnic in the Jerusalem hills; he has actively objected to the construction of cheap housing; and he admits that he would gladly fly a missile into a dam.

Fortunately, the establishment has tucked him safely away in a small office at the Jerusalem headquarters of the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI).

His office is overcrowded with thick files containing the paper trails of battles won and lost against contractors and government agencies, charged with overdeveloping the land.

"In these times of total political, social and constitutional corruption, it's my job to see what little bits of land still exist untouched by man and to fight over them with everybody else," explains Shaked, who defines himself as a "regional real-estate expert."

Shaked - the son of Holocaust survivors who came to Israel to fulfill their Zionist ideology - attests that his love affair with nature, which dates back to the late 1960s, began accidentally. "At school or Scouts, the only reason I'd go on field trips was to meet the girls," Shaked admits. "Then, after the army, I heard that the Society for the Protection of Nature was looking for tour guides in Sinai.

"I signed on the dotted line and they took us for an eight-day 'test trek' in the desert. That's when the 'click' happened.

"At that time, in 1968, most of Sinai was white spots - uncharted, unexplored."

Shaked went on to help establish the David's Rocks field-study center near Santa Katerina in Sinai, where he worked as manager of the facility until the evacuation of Sinai in 1979. Says Shaked, "That's when I first began to understand the delicate balance between elements in nature."

It's also where he fought his first battles against what he calls "the Israeli tendency to turn performance into an end unto itself and achievement into an ideal, fraught with myths and a total lack of proportion."

His first battles were against the construction of roads that would enable the gentrification of the desert - and the ensuing masses of tourists, stampeding through what Shaked considers the untouched, primeval environment. "It's not as if these people really love the land. For many of them, the keys to the air-conditioned jeep - complete with stereo and sofa - are no more than a status symbol to be kept on the coffee table next to the latest high-gloss picture book of some 'jeep challenge safari,' or out-of-the-way country they've just 'done.'

"For others, it's a political act, not unlike settlement activities.

"In all cases, the trash and damage they leave behind is heartbreaking."

But Shaked soon realized that the economic forces at work, which produce books and jeeps and which sell concessions at parks and build houses on what was once agricultural land, were too strong to effectively

compete with. "That's when I realized the battle was Sisyphean, that sometimes you get buried under that same rock you're trying to move," he says. "But you've got to continue trying, because sometimes you do manage to push it forward, even if only for a short time."

One such small victory for nature occurred in 1990, when a few days before builders sent bulldozers in to level parts of the forest alongside Tzur Hadassah, Shaked and a few of his neighbors uprooted wildflower bulbs and replanted them safely in their own yards.

Shaked had been living in a nearby village since 1982, ever since the evacuation of Sinai.

"They told me that on a clear day you could see all the way to the sea from there," he recalls with enthusiasm his discovery of the quaint Jerusalem suburb. Although he found work in journalism, radio and tour guiding there, all pursuits were unsatisfying. "I felt like a Sinai expatriate, never really caring about what was going on around me."

In the meantime, Tzur Hadassah started to become one of Jerusalem's more trendy suburbs, with "build-your-own" housing developments going up alongside apartment buildings.

"It was the early '90s and people were waving the banner of 'accelerated urbanization'. They said we had to prepare for the influx of Russian Jewry.

"Actually, it was just an excuse: the farmers were all bankrupt and wanted to sell their land; the bureaucrats were seeking ways of manufacturing more paperwork to justify their existence; and the land sharks, the speculators - well they had just found a new way to make a fast buck."

Shaked claims it was the first time he saw the relationship between capital and government at work. "I have taken incriminating paperwork to the courts, but they don't seem to be in a hurry to do anything about it," he says. "The state attorney is too busy covering up for the establishment and the courts. Well, when you see how they treat pedophiles and rapists, what can you expect them to do against those who merely rape the land?"

At the time, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon occupied the dual roles of construction and housing minister and head of the Israel Lands Administration. In those capacities, he approved incentives for the redesignation of agricultural land for construction, enabling farmers to receive 50% of the real-estate value of their land in exchange for returning it to the ILA.

In 2002, several social and green organizations petitioned the High Court against this amendment and won. "The bureaucrats demanded that the Lands Administration supply land for 50,000 housing units each year," explains Shaked. "That number is absolutely hideous and - most years - uncalled for.

"I'm not saying that everyone who wants to develop the land is guided by financial considerations," he continues. "Gabriel (Gabrosh) Rapaport, who was my primary nemesis in Sinai and who wanted to cut across the desert with highways, was guided by a love of the land no less fervent than mine. He loved the land and wanted everyone to partake of it, regardless of the cost. He believed in what he was doing and I still feel he was a worthy opponent.

"But [the Jerusalem Development Authority] approach belongs to the days of Mapai [the forerunner of the Labor Party] - of 'development' as an ideal in itself."

Today, the urbanization of the Jerusalem environs continues, unabated. In 1992, the Koversky Report proposed the annexation of 15,000 dunams in Jerusalem for what they claimed was a necessary response to regional geo-political threats.

This resulted in accelerated construction at Ora and Aminadav, on the way to Hadassah Ein Kerem and even on the agricultural lands of Kibbutz Ramat Rahel.

In 2002, the Nativ Report proposed the annexation of an additional 45,000 dunams, all the way from Jerusalem to Har Adar (beyond Mevaseret Zion) and Mata (towards Beit Shemesh).

Shaked believes that "geo-politics," "population increase" and other reasons are no more than buzzwords justifying the mass redesignation of land. He swears he will continue to fight the capital-government connection, even though he claims he is surprised each time he and his friends succeed in thwarting their plans.

"I know our successes are like killing a phoenix. It may fall asleep for awhile, but will only rear its head again in the near future," he says.

If you ask him now, Shaked will say that he "deals with the juices at the bottom of the trash heap... But I know that someday, long after the ultimate dream of 'conquering the land' and turning it into one immense urban ghetto crisscrossed by eight-lane highways comes true, nature will prevail.

"On that day," he says, dreamy-eyed, "the Trans-Israel Highway will crumble beneath reborn trees; the canal joining the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea will become blocked with mud; the hotels of Dahab and Nuweiba will be covered by deep, blue sea and corals; and the roads in the Sinai will be lost underneath the sand dunes."

Credit: Ofer Barsadeh