

From Wasteland to Eden: Environmental Territoriality and the Remaking of the Political Ecology of East Jerusalem

Yair Agmon

Abstract

This article tracks the relationship between waste, environmentalism, and settler territoriality and its mobilization in the remaking of East Jerusalem's political ecology. While using environmental discourses for Palestinian dispossession is as old as the colonization of Palestine, this article shows how, in recent years, the Israeli state and private settler organizations have re-imagined the natural environment of the Wadi al-Rababa neighborhood and the Hinnom Valley through the lens of Jewish biblical cultural memory to pursue territory. It draws on extensive fieldwork in the heritage tourism sector to demonstrate how conceiving the Hinnom Valley as transitioning from a neglected wasteland to a biblical Eden is used to claim a Jewish relationship to land and sever Palestinian claims to property and sovereignty. It also demonstrates how settler political ecologies are deeply tied to racialization work, producing differences vis-à-vis temporality and the environment.

Keywords:

Political ecology; wasteland; temporality; dispossession; Indigenous "extinction"; state environmentalism; greenwashing.

The Hinnom Valley is a sliver of land at the foothills of the small Palestinian neighborhood of Wadi al-Rababa, located southeast of Jerusalem's Old City (figure 1).¹ Over the last five years, the once quiet valley, home to agricultural lands owned by Wadi al-

Rababa's residents, has undergone a radical transformation as Israeli authorities developed the area for tourism. This development has dispossessed Palestinians from their lands and severed their cultural and communal practices. Israeli authorities nevertheless frame this environmentally destructive development as an act of protecting the natural environment of the Hinnom Valley. Indeed, over three years of observing and documenting the process of dispossession in the Hinnom Valley – interviewing park officials, employees, and visitors, and during over a dozen guided tours – I was told again and again that the park's development was designed to safeguard the natural and open space of Jerusalem's "Green Belt" and conserve the valley's biblical landscape for its valuable cultural heritage.² This act of protection, I was told, was urgently needed in response to the valley's environmental dereliction. Authorities proposed to remedy the disrepair by peeling back Palestinian life to restore the landscape to its original state, an agricultural Eden.

Embedded in the vision offered by the Israeli state is the imagination of the non-human environment of Wadi al-Rababa and the Hinnom Valley, as if shifting on an axis from wasteland to Eden. On this imagined axis, Palestinians, the longtime owners and cultivators of the land, are associated with the barren and unproductive wasteland, a trope as old as the colonization of Palestine. In contrast, Jewish actors, such as authorities, settlers, and tourists, are imagined as reviving a flourishing Eden and are thus given authority over the land as those capable of its improvement – that is, adding value to supposedly unproductive land – a dynamic captured in the now infamous Zionist desire to make the desert bloom. This particular environmental imaginary – a term defined by geographer Diana Davis as the "constellation of ideas that groups of humans develop about a given landscape" – is not only constructed but entirely false, drawing heavily on colonial and imperial desires to possess lands.³ And yet, these imaginaries carry immense power to change the material conditions of communities, leading to the loss of property, cultivation areas, relationship to land, and sovereignty. Moreover, as Edward Said argued, environmental imaginaries, and in particular Zionism's political ecology, are powerful tools to construct racialized hierarchies and produce property regimes by rendering cultural difference as natural and timeless.⁴

This article shows how environmental distinctions – between wastelands and Edens, disrepair and rejuvenation, ruins and revival, desert and bloom, nonlife and life – are drawn and mobilized for the material displacement of Palestinians from their property and cultural practices. Such distinctions are fundamentally temporal as they denote a moment of rupture, an axis of time, and subsequent improvement by settlers – progressing from wasteland to Eden. To demonstrate how the state and settlers claim symbolic and material ownership over nature based on biblical interpretations of Palestine's landscape, this article first presents the unfolding of events of the last five years and the historical circumstances that produced the Hinnom Valley as an open space. Subsequently, I discuss the legal construction of the Hinnom Valley as empty, a move that allowed Israeli authorities to seize

control of privately owned Palestinian land. Then, the article examines how the Farm in the Valley – colloquially known as the “Biblical Farm” – is constructed as an ecological unit of rejuvenation, an Eden, to claim a Jewish patrimony over the natural world.

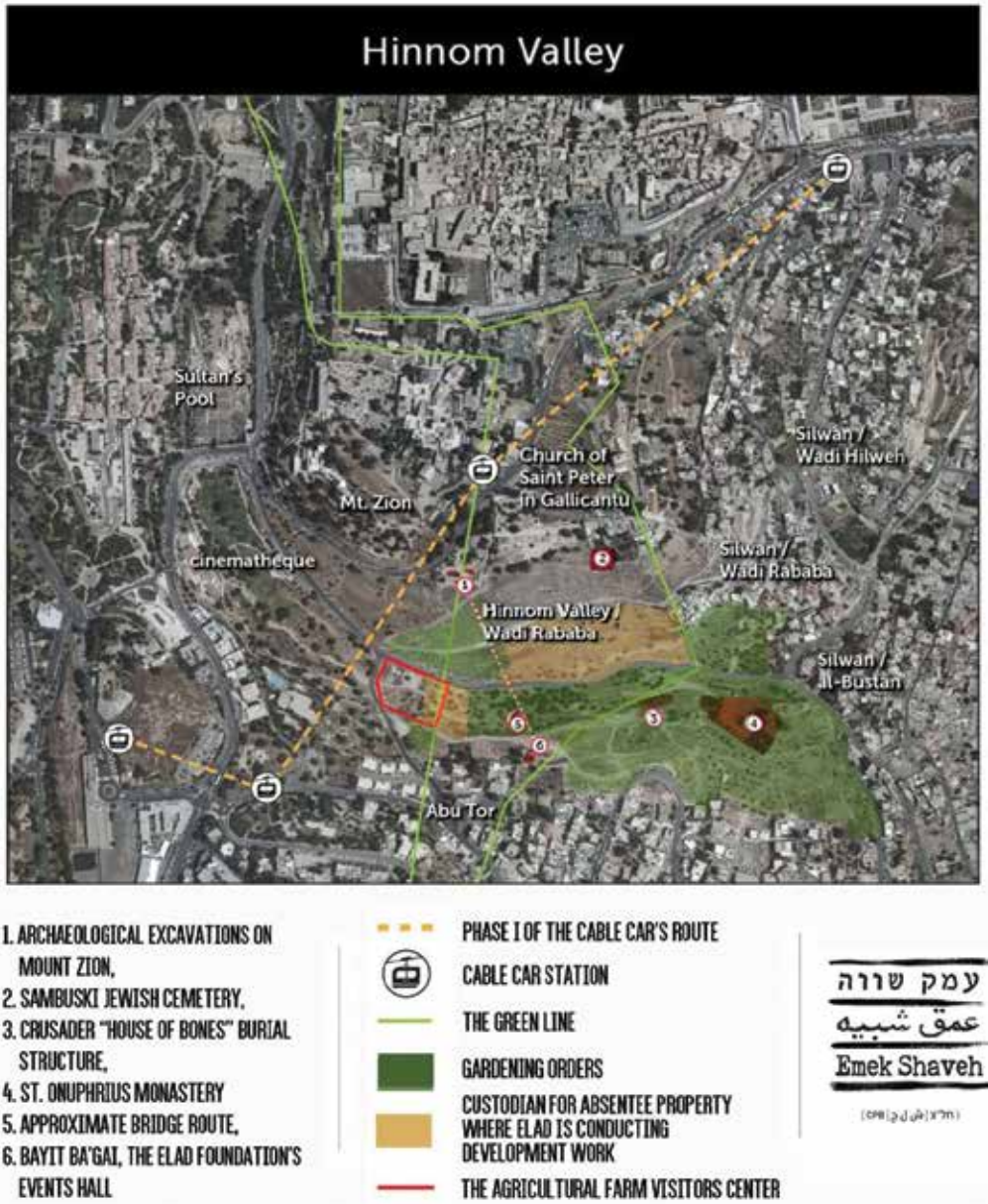


Figure 1. The Hinnom Valley/Wadi al-Rababa Area, November 2022. Map courtesy of the Israeli cultural rights NGO, Emek Shaveh, online at emekshaveh.org/en/hinnom-valley-monitoring-report/ (accessed 2 October 2024).



Figure 2. A view of the Hinnom Valley agricultural lands, August 2021. Photo by author.



Figure 3. A view of the Wadi al-Rababa neighborhood, August 2021. Photo by author.

It is critical to note that I have chosen to focus here on the Israeli mechanisms of settler-colonial dispossession, given my own proximity to and “implication” in these systems as a Jewish Israeli Jerusalemite.⁵ This focus by no means suggests that residents of Wadi al-Rababa are passive actors who have not mounted any resistance. Indeed, Palestinian residents of Wadi al-Rababa, alongside a coalition of supporters from adjacent

neighborhoods, have filed legal opposition to the land seizures and undertaken a public campaign to call into question the morality of putting Palestinian private property in the hands of messianic settlers – a grassroots resistance I have observed, participated in, and remain in close connection to. My intention here is to contribute to the understanding of structures of environmental dispossession and refrain from reproducing the much-criticized dialectical dimension of settler-colonial theory in which Indigenous people appear only in opposition to state-led oppression.⁶ Thus, while the focus of the paper is on the Israeli state and settlers, its commitment lies with the Palestinian residents of Wadi al-Rababa seeking justice, sovereignty, and decolonization of their lands.

Wadi al-Rababa, the Hinnom Valley, and Territorial Ecology

In 2019, when I began my fieldwork in nearby Wadi Hilwa, Batn al-Hawa, and the City of David, the valley was a quiet enclave in the heart of the densely populated city, and far from a tourist destination. Yet, throughout my frequent trips to the valley during 2021, 2022, and 2023, each visit introduced a host of new developments, rapidly encroaching into Palestinian land: a road paved seemingly to nowhere, a new staircase built from one plot to the next, a handful of olive trees uprooted, or a structure erected somewhere across the hills. Local landowners expressed anger at these rapid changes, insisting that the “Biblical Farm’s” development had “destroyed the natural beauty” of their neighborhood and brought in waste and trash.⁷ For them, life is already lived under settler-colonialism’s “creeping apartheid” and the constant threat of expulsion and dispossession as non-citizen residents of East Jerusalem.⁸ And yet, residents I spoke to saw in the development of the park a different kind of violence that was marked distinctly as following the construction of the park.

It is tempting to describe small and incremental changes to Wadi al-Rababa’s ecology as part of the slow violence of settler colonialism. But there is a marked difference between the recent rapid process of dispossession that is the focus of this paper and the long-term environmental development of settler colonialism, which renders Palestine’s “rural space a barren wilderness” and facilitates “the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.”⁹ It is thus worthwhile recounting the historical and current forms of settler-colonial violence, slow and rapid, that make the Hinnom Valley a unique landscape in which colonial powers and residents have negotiated the ontology of nature in Palestine, which Ruba Salih and Olaf Cory have argued only becomes “Nature” – an imagined object, pristine and untouched by humans, and thus worthy of preservation in its natural state – when appropriated by the structures of settler colonialism.¹⁰

Mentions of the Hinnom Valley date back to biblical times, when it was located outside the ancient city’s walls and used as its necropolis. Biblical scripture mentions the Hinnom Valley as a site of unsanctioned pagan practices, in particular, human sacrifice. As such, the valley is associated with Jewish apocalypticism and the physical location of Hell, translated in King James’ Bible from the Hebrew name *Gei Ben Hinnom*, abbreviated to *Gehinnom*, as *Gehenna*. The mystical relationship between death and waste, suggesting the Hinnom Valley is a messianic wasteland with divine purpose, has not been borne out in archaeological

excavations, which found no signs of rituals or sacrifice. However, excavations did confirm the Hinnom Valley to be an ancient burial site stretching back to the Roman era and continuing all the way to the present with several active Jewish, Muslim, and Karaite graveyards dotting the landscape – and most likely associating the Hinnom Valley with nonlife.



Figure 4. A view of the olive groves in the Hinnom Valley's lowlands in June 2023. Photo by author.



Figure 5. "Valley of Hinnom," between 1898 and 1914, American Colony (Jerusalem) Photo Department, G. Eric and Edith Matson Collection, U.S. Library of Congress, Washington, DC, online at loc.gov/pictures/resource/matpc.11372/ (accessed 12 November 2024).

From its beginnings in 1918, the British colonial government in Palestine saw Jerusalem's cityscape and surrounding open spaces as an "untouched" landscape and a perfect image of an idealized Christian-Zionist Holy Land – despite the pervasive presence of traditional seasonal Palestinian agriculture, evidenced in photographs from the time (figure 5).¹¹ Seeking to preserve the image of Jerusalem as a distinctly unmodern sacred site, the British put in place a series of policies and regulations that protected its aesthetics. These policies saw the city as "a treasure that needed both to be protected as such for the future and to be restored to such from changes made in the immediate past and present."¹² In one such policy, the areas surrounding Jerusalem's wall were cleared of existing structures, and residential development and construction was prohibited to create a belt-like public park around the Old City. The Hinnom Valley, included in British preservation plans, was at that time an active cultivation area with built terraces and olive groves, landscape that has since become the hallmark of Palestinian natural and cultural heritage.¹³ Indeed, while the colonial government saw the natural state of Jerusalem as one of a medieval treasure dating back to the days of Jesus, its actual landscape was made up of the traditional cultivation practices of Palestinians that made up the very image of the Holy Land.¹⁴

With the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the ensuing 1947–49 war, the Hinnom Valley was split across the two sides of the 1949 Israeli–Jordanian armistice line, serving as part of the buffer zone between them. In 1967, the Israeli army conquered the West Bank and illegally annexed large parts of Jerusalem's eastern neighborhoods into Israeli territory, Wadi al-Rababa among them, placing them under the administrative control of Jerusalem's municipality. Israeli authorities then effectively abandoned East Jerusalem and failed to provide basic infrastructure, services, and social services.¹⁵ The city and regional planning authorities deliberately resisted approving a zoning plan for East Jerusalem, leading to a rise in illegal construction that does not follow Jerusalem's strict visual building code. Moreover, the lack of services and infrastructure meant that Palestinian residents had to dump waste in their own backyards, and sewage ran into the riverbed of the adjacent Kidron Valley.¹⁶

These structural conditions caused East Jerusalem and the Hinnom Valley to be a veritable wasteland, a landscape which the Natures and Parks Authority has defined as a "refugee landscape," according to Irus Braverman.¹⁷ Braverman demonstrated how Israeli authorities contrast the so-called understanding of Palestinian nature as unmodern and savage with a pristine and bucolic landscape, which they refer to as Nuf Kdumin – the ancient landscape. In the case of the Hinnom Valley, authorities not only drew the distinction but imagined both landscapes to exist in the same place, merely temporally separated. Moreover, they saw the potential to transform one into the other by peeling back the excess discards of Palestinian life. Max Liboiron and Josh Lepaswky point out a connection between the material discard of cultures and the discarding of a culture, in this case Palestinian culture, as both are necessary for the persistence of a system.¹⁸ To move toward Nuf Kdumm and ostensibly protect nature, Israeli authorities needed to clean up the wasteland and discard what they deemed as unnatural elements of the landscape.



Figure 6. View of the “Biblical Farm” National Park from Wadi al-Rababa, June 2023. The park was expanded to additional plots of land (seen as the lower structures in the photo) since 2021. Photo by author.



Figure 7. In 2024, the right-wing messianic settler organization Elad added a biblically themed petting zoo to the farm, April 2024. Photo by author.

In 2019, the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) rebooted a long-delayed plan – originally zoned and approved in 1974 – to develop and operate a visitors center in the Hinnom Valley’s open lands. However, the valley’s lands, while zoned for public use, are privately owned, making any construction contingent on the consent and approval of the owners, who had no interest in forgoing their vital olive groves. Faced with this

legal obstacle, the municipal government declared several privately owned plots empty, full of waste, and neglected, issuing formal “gardening decrees.” This sparsely used legal mechanism allowed Israeli authorities to seize administrative control – though not legal ownership – to begin construction under the auspices of improving the lands for the public good. INPA, relying on a maximalist interpretation of what counts as gardening, commissioned Ir David (the City of David Foundation, or Elad, in Hebrew), a right-wing messianic settler organization, to take on the project of developing and operating the park. Palestinian residents and human rights organizations have been highly critical not only of the administrative seizure of land but, in particular, of the choice to contract Elad. This organization has been working for more than thirty years to colonize East Jerusalem through heritage tourism and property purchases.¹⁹ Moreover, Elad, as many point out, promotes an exclusionary ethno-nationalist vision of Jerusalem’s history by focusing on Jewish remnants of its past and discarding the city’s multicultural history.²⁰ Providing Elad with more territory in East Jerusalem only advances their colonization project.²¹

In 2021, despite joint protests and legal action from Palestinian residents and human rights organizations, Elad opened its visitors center. It touted its center, colloquially dubbed the “Biblical Farm,” as an ecologically minded project in Jerusalem’s designated green belt and marketed it as educating the public about Jewish biblical cultivation practices.²² The national park, now sprawling over several plots and forming an archipelago of control over the Wadi al-Rababa neighborhood, offers a biblical animal petting zoo and a range of agricultural activities under the banner of heritage tourism: foraging for native herbs and plants, crushing grapes and olives using ancient machinery, and crafts associated with Roman-era Jewish culture such as stonemasonry, perfume making, and basket weaving. All of this produced an environmental imaginary of the Hinnom Valley that seeks to embed a Jewish national identity and origins within the valley’s natural environment.



Figure 8. Tourists using a reconstructed olive press at the “Biblical Farm,” July 2022. Photo by author.



Figure 9. A family engaging with the educational modern beehive at the “Biblical Farm,” April 2024. Photo by author.



Figure 10. Tourists participating in a stonemasonry workshop in which they carve Jewish-themed symbols and decorations, July 2022. Photo by author.

Despite boasting values such as sustainability, environmental conservation, and a return to roots, human rights organizations have documented the grave damage the construction, tourist activities, and continual expansion of the “Biblical Farm” has caused Wadi al-Rababa’s residents and its nonhuman environment. Palestinian landowners have lost access to many of their plots, which are now gated and overrun with tourists. Olive groves tended for generations were uprooted, blocked, or simply incorporated into the park’s closed territory. New non-native species were introduced into the landscape, stone structures were erected across the hills, new public pathways were carved through the area, and a massive rope bridge was built across the valley. The increased presence of Jewish settlers working on private Palestinian lands, often unannounced and without permits and sometimes armed, has led to violent clashes and resulted in heightened surveillance of Palestinians.

Today, the environment of the Hinnom Valley is split. On one side remains the traditional agricultural landscape of Palestinians, not yet completely discarded. On the other side, or more precisely, nestled in its midst, is the “Biblical Farm” and its simulacra of an ancient landscape that never existed. These two ecological units not only present radically different relations to land, but they also display how place-based claims for Indigeneity by Palestinians are coopted and undermined by Jewish settlers who imagine themselves as part of the natural world.²³ To achieve their goals, however, settlers first had to transform their environmental imaginaries into legal regimes that allow dispossession.

Wastelands, Discards and Dispossession

Encroachments by Israeli authorities and Elad into the Hinnom Valley were made under the auspices of protecting nature, ostensibly conserving the valley’s bucolic landscape and its status as a “green” part of the urban environment. Irus Braverman suggests that nature management, and in particular the establishment of national parks, is a critical part of Israel’s settler-colonial territorial dispossession of Palestinians. This form of dispossession, she points out, has roots in colonial administrations and resonates with other national parks systems used to remove Indigenous peoples from their land.²⁴ The history that links nature protection and dispossession in Zionism is perhaps most infamously captured by the desire to “make the desert bloom.”²⁵

This idiom – applied across topographies and historical moments, albeit shifting in reaction to circumstances – functions as a proverbial form of environmental imaginary, capturing the simultaneous need, as Edward Said argued, to invent a Jewish geography to enable the machinations of imperial land theft.²⁶ It also reveals the colonial ontological assumption about nature and land, a fundamental association of Indigenous practices and being with emptiness.²⁷ Wastelands were never empty but were mapped as such by equating a lack of European capitalist surplus production to an absence of ownership.²⁸ This was no different in Palestine, where seasonal agriculture was marked by the British and Zionists as non-existent.²⁹

Meanwhile, Zionist institutions have long sought to cover the traces of colonial violence, the wastelands of war, with manufactured “natural” environments.³⁰ Emptiness was also achieved through the slow violence of modernized agriculture that

destroys land, crops, and natural habitats and the relationship of native peoples to the more-than-human world.³¹ Zionist projects to make the desert bloom – diverting water, mass forestation, drying marshlands, introducing new crops and foreign livestock, enclosing grazing grounds, and developing open agricultural lands into urban centers – were so destructive that their cumulative impact amounted to what Mazin Qumsiyeh and Mohammad Abusarhan call an “environmental Nakba.”³² Indeed, the distinction between emptiness and fullness relies, as Ruba Salih and Olaf Corry put it, on “an equivalence between Indigenous Life and Nonlife, with humans and nonhumans together fossilized or desertified by the ongoing settler colonial project which aimed at turning the settlers into the new Indigenous.”³³ Heritage tourism development in the Hinnom Valley functions in many ways by producing a wasteland to be replaced by an Eden.

Before the Hinnom Valley could become an Eden, it first had to be declared legally empty and in need of improvement. This legal process began with the application of the municipal gardening decree in 2019 and unfurled over two years as a group of landowners from Wadi al-Rababa mounted a legal challenge in 2020. The courts, unsurprisingly, ultimately sided with the state. Yet, in the process, they had to articulate a legal reason to categorize a thriving Palestinian community full of life as a wasteland. Their argument relied on three steps: disqualifying the Palestinians’ use of land, drawing a relationship between trash and dereliction, and qualifying the state as the only agent capable of protection and improvement.

The court’s discussion of the environment and humans’ relationship to it helps us understand just how it constructs the political ecology of the Hinnom Valley. On the matter of use, the courts “interpreted the term ‘empty lot’ under a utilitarian interpretation. In examining the [validity] of a gardening decree, the courts assess whether in effect the use currently conducted on the land matches the designated use determined for it in the [zoning] plan.” Given that the plots had been designated as “an open space and a national park,” any Palestinian use of the lands, “even if olive trees are planted in the lots,” was regarded as inconsistent with their state designation: “Given that the condition of the plots today does not allow them to be used according to their designated use as determined in the plan, it is possible to determine that the plots are not used according to their valid planned use.”³⁴ The courts argued that, ultimately, what defines the emptiness of land is neither physical presence nor intended use of its legal private owners. Rather, the only proper land use, and thus the only legitimate claim to access and control the land itself, is its official state designated zoning as a national park. Accepting this narrow definition of qualified use means the denial of the entire lifeworlds of Palestinians residing in Wadi al-Rababa.

There are two assumptions embedded in this language and the broader legal argument. First, in denying Palestinians’ relationship to their land and cultivation, the courts affirmed that nature is a category administered and defined by the state. The olive groves are recognized to be present in the valley, yet they are nevertheless imagined as exogenous. By extension, the community’s use of it is also disqualified, thereby legally defining the land as empty. Thus, a national park not yet in existence receives priority when it comes to the protection of nature over the traditional keepers of the land. Nature can only be imagined to be part of a “settler-ecology.” Second, this process was done through legal

mechanisms ostensibly meant to safeguard both nature and the rights of residents. Yet, despite the appeal of Palestinians to the courts, the decision ultimately affirmed and cemented dispossession, pointing to the limits of inclusion and recognition.³⁵

For all the discussion of emptiness, much of the legal definition of the Hinnom Valley as a wasteland revolved around a highly detailed account of waste. A testimony of a park ranger given to the court stated that: “There are many disturbances and hazards” in the land, such as “burnt trees [firewood], trash, construction waste, household waste, and invasive flora.” Additionally, the court claimed that the dereliction of the land is reflected in “asphalt, wood pallets, plastic bags, and bare black zones [that] testify to fires that occurred.” The court imagined trash to have infiltrated the landscape so deeply that it became infused with the land itself, stating that there must be more “waste present underneath the first layer of visible soil.” Meanwhile, the court noted that the park ranger “mentioned in his testimonies that the images that were presented before him during his inquiry, which show the plots as clean and well organized ... were taken after the defendant had cleaned the place.” The court took this as evidence “that it is not the plaintiffs who take care of the maintenance and cleanliness of the land, but the Natures and Parks Authority which operated according to the decree.”³⁶

The association of Palestinians with waste suggests a lack of care for the plots in question. Yet, as Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins demonstrated, this metaphor extends far beyond the immediate management of trash, and suggests that Palestinians are ungovernable and, thus, in the eyes of the Israeli state, incapable of sovereignty.³⁷ This slippage in the scale of waste, between the residues of life under occupation and the denial of sovereignty, is enabled, as Liboiron and Lepawsky point out, by the fact that waste “always overflows its official meanings, and the technical systems designed to manage and contain it.”³⁸ Indeed, in the court’s argument, the excess of trash is meant to denote not only the dereliction of maintenance but dereliction of the land – completely ignoring the well-documented infrastructural abandonment of East Jerusalem that forces Palestinians to live with their own trash. Thus, the courts argue that the right to land is intertwined with, if not stemming from, the relationship between humans and their environment, specifically measured through the accounting of litter.

Undergirding the argument on use and waste is the perceived ability to add value to the land, either by fulfilling the zoning code or by cleaning up the landscape. Legal scholar Brenna Bhandar demonstrated how a Lockean colonial legal doctrine of improvement imagined subsistence farming and Indigenous ways of using land as unproductive. Thus, settlers could claim land by rendering it “productive” and integrating it into the capitalist economy. Investment by settlers, in essence, provided a legal claim to property.³⁹ The “doctrine of improvement” worked “through the attribution of value to the lives of those defined as having the capacity, will, and technology to appropriate.”⁴⁰ In the case of the Hinnom Valley, Israel’s courts accepted the current state of the land as derelict and, more importantly, the state’s claim to be able to improve it.

Improvement here, however, was not understood as capitalist accumulation. Rather, improvement was understood as environmental in two distinct ways. First, the material clean-up of waste and discards, and second, the conservation of nature. In this articulation,

the Hinnom Valley is a part of Jerusalem’s historical nature, empty of urban development but full of natural life and it is the current owners of the land who have damaged it by filling it with waste and endangering its existence as a historical monument to Jewish cultural history – turning it from an Eden to a wasteland. In the court’s imagination, the state has the capacity to roll back the excess Palestinian residue to secure the land’s rejuvenation. Thus, the courts ultimately tied the right to land to the imagined axis of progression from wasteland to Eden and granted the land to those imagined capable of its protection and improvement.

Making Edens

Following the initial legal transformation of the lands in Wadi al-Rababa into a national park, INPA contracted Elad to perform various clean-up operations and construct a visitors center. In 2021, a newly established segment of the national park dubbed the “Biblical Farm” opened on two plots. It has continued to expand since, forming today a kind of archipelago across the valley. The farm itself is not an agriculturally productive farm but contains a slew of agricultural-themed attractions and activities aimed at tourists: cultivation of local varieties of herbs, a simulation of winemaking and oil production, and a small petting zoo. The farm’s overall landscaping and design is intended to simulate, albeit not necessarily accurately, how “Jerusalem’s inhabitants sustained themselves thousands of years ago,” when the valley was ostensibly the agricultural backbone of the city.⁴¹



Figure 11. The park’s artificial waterfall is often used in promotional materials to depict the park as an idyllic oasis in the desert. Photo by author.

During my time in the “Biblical Farm,” attending tours and talking to park employees and tourists, I heard the farm described, again and again, as a cohesive ecological unit that stands in stark contrast to its environment. These descriptions painted the farm as a veritable Eden, frequently pointing to the lush green hills, the abundance of vegetation, and the omnipresent sound of its gushing artificial waterfalls to describe it as an oasis. This spatial and environmental distinction relied on two elements: a temporal arc in which a former wasteland was revived and a depiction of its natural environment as a cohesive ecological unit that reflects the cultural heritage of the Jewish people from the time of the Bible. These distinctions were mobilized to suggest a patrimonial link between Jewish people and the ecology of Palestine despite the artifice of its agricultural simulation.

By suggesting an inherent link between cultural practices and the natural environment, dated to time immemorial, the “Biblical Farm” reflects a natural relationship between Jewish culture and nature. As Patrick Wolfe argued, agriculture does not merely provide settlers with the productive power necessary to sustain their society, but, as he puts it, “agriculture, with its life-sustaining connectedness to land, is a potent symbol of settler-colonial identity” that roots people in the land.⁴² In the “Biblical Farm,” the relationship between the land and settler-colonial identity is bolstered through interpretation of the biblical text, which is then used to determine what is “original” or “native.” Anthropologist Jessica Cattelino reminds us that despite the temptation to relate native species with native peoples, the definition of “native species” has more often than not been embraced by settlers to anchor them in the land as their own.⁴³ Cattelino sees such acts of categorization as ways to use the powerful symbol of rootedness to firmly place the settler in the soil, as “nature and political belonging are co-produced.”⁴⁴ Both temporality and flora are mobilized in the environmental imaginary constructed by the “Biblical Farm” to create visual, ecological, and ultimately cultural differences in an attempt to politically reshuffle settlers and natives.

Tours often made a point of sketching out a temporal rupture that delineated two clear moments in time, assigning to each an environmental condition. As one guide told a group of visitors:

Before we got here, there was nothing, just a trash-filled wasteland. Before there was this beautiful, well-maintained, exquisitely clean park, this valley was a wasteland. The landscape was full of litter, unkempt, and poorly maintained. It is rare to be able to enjoy shade amid this urban landscape, East Jerusalem does not usually have this kind of a gem.⁴⁵

In contrast to the wasteland of the “before times,” devoid of beauty, cleanliness, and care, the guide portrays the farm as it stands today, after Elad’s arrival and improvement, as full of life, blooming, and serving the public. This distinction, which echoes the state’s imagined axis from wasteland to Eden, uses the environment to mark a moment of rupture. The presence of waste, trash, and refuse before the rupture,

and their absence after, are used to suggest that the break is not merely visual but marks a different relationship between the people and the land.



Figure 12. A tour guide explains to tourists how the national park came into being. Photo by author.

Embedded in this narration of the shift in control from Palestinians to settlers is a story of arrival. Settler arrival narratives serve the territorial and political purpose in the settler-colonial context of distinguishing between who is modern and who is not, often by depicting Indigenous people as a relic of the past, extinct, or stuck in time.⁴⁶ In the Anglophone settler-colonial context, many instances of Indigenous dispossession turn on the axis of modernity, separating the modern settler and the unmodern colonial subject.⁴⁷ In this iteration, again reflecting the state's temporality, the native Palestinians are deemed failed custodians of the land. At the same time, the settlers are described as those who care truly for it. These stories are pernicious, beyond their cultural exclusion, as they drive and enable legal dispossession through land regimes that render Indigenous and native peoples' lands as white settler property.⁴⁸

In the case of the Hinnom Valley, the story of arrival is told as a story of revival and return as part of a "messianic temporality."⁴⁹ In this story, settlers peel back the layers of discard to unearth the Eden that once was. This story conveniently tackles the persistent and tangled question of "When does a settler become native?" by dismissing the question altogether and declaring, "We were always here."⁵⁰ The temporal element of the "Biblical Farm's" story argues that for settlers, the

association between nature and identity is not only recently forged but rather a natural relation that stretches back to time immemorial, making a claim of “settler indigeneity.”⁵¹ Edward Said has shown that the Zionist narrative is based on a temporal break, represented by the transformation of wasteland into a blooming desert, and that this narrative and its associated temporality were necessary to drive the physical transformation of the land. In the case of the Hinnom Valley, the temporal demarcation provides an administrative and moral imperative for its transformation, and it drives the symbolic and material construction of the “Biblical Farm” as a distinct ecological unit.



Figure 13. In a video tour of Israel’s “Biblical Farm,” an actor shows his counterpart newly grown wheat, January 2022. Online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUofuVaHmLA (accessed 6 October 2024). Screen grab by author.

The farm-as-ecological-unit is constructed not only through temporal distinctions. Its demarcation is similarly made through its flora and its presentation as a simulated ecological system of ancient agricultural production. In a video tour produced for Tu BiShvat, a holiday associated with agricultural heritage, a tour guide dressed in costume meant to mimic ancient Jewish garb demonstrates to a contemporary visitor how each variety of plant used on the farm played a role in the life of those who inhabited the land during biblical times (figure 13).⁵² In one moment, the actor instructs his modern-day counterpart about the utility of wheat: “Isn’t this wheat beautiful? We can eat it! And when it is dry, it is great for making flour.” As he unravels the wheat’s encasing, his interlocutor asks him: “So you are separating the wheat from the chaff?” “Exactly!” he responds.

Importantly, the guide uses a well-known quote from the Bible, “separating the wheat from the chaff,” to link the common agricultural production of wheat and its derivatives with, in this case, Jewish environmental history. Moreover, this common

idiom points to the fundamental processes of producing ecological and social differences on the farm: distinguishing between valuable and invaluable, between what should be kept and what should be discarded. This formula, using a quote from the Bible to introduce a plant, is repeated again and again throughout the tour, creating an inventory of the farm's flora: ezov and sage were used to make perfumes for temple rituals, pressed olive oil was used for lighting, dates and pomegranates are two of the "seven species" mentioned in the Bible, grapes were crushed for wine, and so on. Critically, each plant is linked not only to the biblical text itself but to an agricultural or cultural practice described in the Bible or later Jewish scripture and often related to some aspect of Jewish life and religious practice. As such, the plants in the farm, while curated, are nevertheless made to represent agricultural traditions of Jewish life during the First and Second Temple eras.

However, the plants cultivated on the farm are neither agriculturally productive nor reflective of Jerusalem's traditional and historical ecology – a somewhat cruel irony given the nearby Palestinian olive groves, which represent a layered agricultural history of the area that have been fenced off and made inaccessible to visitors. Rather, the various herbs, trees, and animals are culled into a single unit – the "Biblical Farm" – by their association with a cultural and biblical interpretation of Palestine's environment, regardless of their geographical origin or scientific taxonomy. Indeed, settlers have collapsed nature into a *biblically described* nature, suggesting an ontological identification between Jewish cultural identity and an originary presence in the land. Or, to recall Jessica Cattelino's observation, that constructing nature through the lens of biblical ontology and its determination as ancient mobilizes the allegory of native plants to suggest the nativeness of Jewish people while excluding Palestinians from being a part of nature. Indeed, creating this inventory of native species and embedding it within the Hinnom Valley sets up the farm's space as one subject to conservation rather than development, hiding the act of dispossession under the auspices of protection.

The "Biblical Farm" insists on itself as an ecological unit that reflects the Jewish cultural heritage embedded in the particular location of the Hinnom Valley. Yet this environmental imagination is constantly undermined by the unignorable presence of Palestinian olive groves that surround its gated area. In one way, the olive groves serve to reinforce the distinction between wasteland and Eden, as they are visually different from the farm. Yet in other, more pronounced ways, they undermine the farm's claim for rejuvenation and restoration, clearly displaying the ancient Palestinian cultural landscape so profoundly embedded in the image of the fellahin.⁵³ Examining the valley's landscape as a whole demonstrates that the "Biblical Farm," for all its claims of an environmental imaginary of Eden, sustainable and ecological, has worked to destroy and replace the existing ecological system rather than preserve and protect it.



Figure 14. Tourists posing as ancient Jews for a refrigerator magnet, with the “Biblical Farm” and Silwan as the backdrop, July 2021. Photo by the author.

Conclusion

Stories about how people are located in the environment produce property regimes and racial categories by naturalizing cultural differences and hierarchies. Mobilizing these racial categories and property regimes, settlers in the Hinnom Valley seek to contest Palestinian claims to Indigeneity by severing their historical ties to cultivation and claiming patrimony over the more-than-human world. This process relies not only on territorial removal but on placing a cultural object, in this case the newly minted “Biblical Farm” National Park, to obfuscate colonial violence. In *Tolerance is a Wasteland*, Saree Makdisi examines how Israel’s denial of its settler-colonial history and actions relies on greenwashing the traces of violence by placing forests and monuments on sites of violence, a process he argues creates a “double denial.” Makdisi points out that the environmental dimensions of this violence and obfuscation are what perpetuate settler-colonial structures, as they are the very “project of greening the landscape” that “makes it possible to overlook the dark history occluded by the act of joyous affirmation, but also makes the dark history possible in the first place; it nourishes and sustains it over the years.”⁵⁴ Moreover, as Hagar Kotef argues, greening,

blooming, and making Edens not only covers up violence, it forms a fundamental attachment to it, resulting in a settler identity in which “sustainability is essentially and necessarily violent.”⁵⁵

While this case study involves a particular sliver of land in East Jerusalem, we have seen the state of Israel and settler organizations increasingly mobilize strategies of dispossession that bind cultural heritage to the material environment and in particular to the more-than-human world. It is therefore critical to understand these administrative and cultural mechanisms as they continue to spread, even in cases where they appear more fractured, piecemeal, and opportunistic and garner less attention than dispossession and violence that occur at times of intense and militarized conflicts and genocide – though they are, of course, linked and intertwined. The urgency of understanding this form of dispossession emerges out of the possibility of reversing it, as its status is still very much in flux. Yet, to undo it, we must understand that environmental dispossession is not only material, territorial, or legal, but also profoundly embedded in Israeli culture.

Yair Agmon is a PhD candidate in the department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Endnotes

- 1 The valley, Wadi al-Rababa, is named after the *rababa*, one of the earliest bowl-shaped instruments played with a bow.
- 2 The “Green Belt” is a loosely defined term used by various authorities such as the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority (INPA), Jewish National Fund (JNF), Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (KKL), and the Jerusalem Development Authority to denote open “nature” spaces at the periphery of the city, though its geography is not defined in legislation or in official plans.
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