



May 16, 2011

**“Twinning” the TDSB with Injustice:
Jewish National Fund–Downsview Park School Twinning Programs**

“I attended this event and it was fantastic. It was an honour and pleasure to bring greetings from the TDSB. JNF will always receive the support of my office and the TDSB.”

James Pasternak, August 24, 2009ⁱ

About the School Twinning Program

The School Twinning Program is a joint initiative of Jewish National Fund (JNF) Toronto and Parc Downsview Park Inc., linking the federally-funded Canada Forest at Downsview with the Toronto Community Forest (part of the larger JNF Yatir Forest) in Israel’s Negev region. Two activities have been organized per year since the program began in 2009. Spring programs work directly with schools and fall activities are open to the public. The first event, on June 17, 2009, attracted over 1000 grades 3-8 students from 5 area Jewish schools and 9 area public and Catholic schools. The students took part in a day of environmental activities and planted trees such that a number of trees would also be planted in the Toronto Community Forest.

According to a press release in September 2009, the Twinning Programs intend to “build bridges of sustainability” and “highlight the shared values of Canada and Israel with respect to the environment.”ⁱⁱ It is also evident that they are intended to foster support for the JNF and the state of Israel.

The next School Twinning Program will be taking place on 19 May, 2011. There are 2 TDSB schools scheduled to participate, along with several Catholic and Jewish schools. The JNF contacts for the program are Rebecca Woods Baum and Aviva Reifler. They can both be reached at the JNF Toronto office: 416-638-7200.

What is the JNF?

The JNF was established in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress as an arm of the World Zionist Organization for the explicit purpose of purchasing and developing land for Jewish settlement in Palestine. Following the Palestinian Nakba of 1948—in which approximately 750,000 Palestinians either fled or were forced from their homes by Zionist militias—the new Israeli state allocated large parcels of confiscated land to the JNF. These lands included those of so-called “present absentees” who remained within Israel’s new borders and became citizens, but lost title to their property. Today, the JNF owns approximately 13% of Israel’s land area, which it reserves for the exclusive benefit of Jews.ⁱⁱⁱ

Problems with the JNF

The JNF has come under fire by various legal organizations and international bodies on account of its discriminatory practices. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has noted that “large-scale and systematic confiscation of Palestinian land and property by the State and the transfer of that property to these agencies constitute an institutionalized form of discrimination because these agencies by definition would deny the use of these properties to non-Jews.”^{iv} Former Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz also ruled that the JNF's practice of acquiring and reserving land exclusively for Jews is discriminatory.^v

In addition, Palestinian human rights organization Al Haq, an affiliate of the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists, has accused the JNF of complicity in Israeli war crimes by covering up the destroyed and depopulated Palestinian villages of Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba in 1967 with the Canada Park forest.^{vi} Fifteen million Canadian dollars were donated to plant a forest on the remains of the villages, which lie in the occupied West Bank and thus beyond Israel's internationally recognized borders. Canada Park continues to be a popular destination for Jewish Israelis from across Israel, while many of the Palestinians who had called what is now Canada Park their home continue to live in refugee camps on the other side of the separation wall, forbidden to return.

Ongoing violations

The JNF's efforts are currently focused in the Negev desert under the banner of the *Blueprint Negev* campaign. Hopes are that this initiative will make way for 250,000 Jews to be settled in the area, referred to by the JNF as “Israel’s last frontier.”^{vii} In partnership with the Israeli government and a number of private organizations, this project aims to spread out the Israeli population as well as attract new immigrants, particularly from Canada and the US, to be among “Israel's newest generation of pioneers.” The overtly colonial nature of this campaign is indicative of the ongoing project of internal colonization that continues apace. The Negev is depicted as “empty” land, a “frontier,” just waiting to be settled by Zionist “pioneers.”

Unsurprisingly, the Negev is not empty, and is in fact home to nearly 200,000 Negev Bedouin.^{viii} These previously semi-nomadic people now live primarily in an area northwest of Beersheva known as the *Siyag*, or “closure,” in which the remnants of the Negev Bedouin population were forced by Israeli authorities to live following the 1948 Nakba. Restricted to living within this small area, Negev Bedouin are further confined by the fact that Israel has only recognized 7 out of more than 50 villages in the *Siyag*. The rest of the villages in the area are “unrecognized” and are therefore denied access to public services such as water, electricity, and sewage treatment. Since they are unrecognized, these villages are constantly under threat of demolition to make way for development projects including Jewish residential settlements and JNF forests. The most notorious ongoing example of this is of the Negev Bedouin village of al-Araqib, which has been demolished and subsequently rebuilt by villagers over a dozen times in recent months.^{ix} The village is reportedly being removed to make way for a new JNF development. Numerous campaigns by Palestinian, Israeli and Jewish-American organizations have been launched to oppose these actions, but so far, they have been to no avail.

The Yatir Forest

The Yatir Forest, home to the Toronto Community Forest, is by no means the most egregious example of the JNF's work. There are, however, a number of notable concerns. Although it mostly lies on the Israeli side of the green line, a substantial portion of the forest protrudes into the West Bank, cutting into illegally occupied territory to link up with a handful of illegal Jewish settlements on the other side. Many of these settlements are particularly notorious for their attacks on Palestinians in the area. There has also been substantial criticism regarding the negative environmental impacts of the forest. Critics have contended that forestation causes serious and irreparable damage to the ecosystem due to the introduction of foreign species, such as the European pine. Many have furthermore suggested that one of the primary goals of the forest is to keep so-called illegal Bedouin construction and grazing at bay.^x

Involvement of TDSB Schools

The School Twinning Programs effectively draw a link between the TDSB and these discriminatory practices. In light of the aforementioned problems with the JNF and the School Twinning Programs, Independent Jewish Voices - Canada asks that the TDSB distance itself from this program and ensure that none of its schools participate in the future.

For further information contact toronto@ijvcanada.org.

Independent Jewish Voices – Canada is a national organization that promotes a just resolution to the conflict in Israel and Palestine through the application of international law and respect for the human rights of all parties. IJV has chapters in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Vancouver.

ⁱ James Pasternak, "JNF & Downsview Park Twinning," *Facebook*, August 24, 2009, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/JNF-Downsview-Park-Twinning/117131955543#!/media/set/?set=a.117138350543.112664.117131955543>

ⁱⁱ "Twinning event will see trees planted in federal park in Toronto and forest in Israel," press release, Parc Downsview Park Inc. and JNF Toronto, *Marketwire*, August 28, 2009, <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Parc-Downsview-Park-Inc-1037064.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and all forms of discrimination U.N. Commission on Human Rights," *Habitat International Coalition and Adallah*, March 13-April 21, 2006, <http://www.adalah.org/eng.intl06/un0i6-jnf.pdf>

^{iv} "Consideration of reports submitted by state parties under articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant: Concluding observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Israel)," *U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, December 4, 1998, <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/0BC7883100A95730852569AF00575179>.

^v Nathaniel Popper, "In watershed, Israel deems land-use rules of Zionist icon 'discriminatory': JNF scored over 'Jews-only' sale," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, February 4, 2005, <http://www.forward.com/articles/2854>.

^{vi} "What is Canada Park?" *Al Haq*, 2008, www.alhaq.org/pdfs/what-is-canada-park.pdf.

^{vii} "Israel: The Next 10 Years: JNF's Bold Vision and Commitment to the North and the South," *JNF*, October 25, 2006, http://support.jnf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pr_Next_10.

^{viii} Clinton Bailey, "The Bedouin are not to blame," *Haaretz*, December 6, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1132641.html>.

^{ix} See Nathan Jeffay, "A JNF Drive to Make the Desert Bloom Means Destruction for a Bedouin Village," *Jewish Daily Forward*, February 9, 2011, <http://forward.com/articles/135320/>.

^x Zafir Rinat, "JNF using trees to thwart Bedouin growth in Negev," *Haaretz*, December 11, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1044396.html>.