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'Biblical Mandate': The U.S. Evangelicals Behind the Latest West Bank Land Grab

The Hayovel nonprofit is hoping to plant 3,000 trees in the West Bank by the end of the year, and is already nearly halfway to achieving its initial goal. Yet the land being forested appears to belong mainly to Palestinian farmers

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The Greening Israel Project signpost in the West Bank, opposite from

the settlement of Har Bracha. Credit: Judy Maltz



Judy Maltz

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Looking south from the West Bank settlement of Har Bracha and across the valley, a large patch of green is conspicuous on the otherwise barren slope. Were it not for the freshly painted wooden signpost greeting visitors at this viewpoint, it would have been difficult to make out exactly what was growing there.

The signpost reveals that it is a forest funded by a Norwegian Christian television station, Vision Norway. This forest is part of the Greening Israel Project – a brand-new initiative aimed at covering the

mountains and hills
of the West Bank
with hundreds of
thousands of trees.

The big bold letters
at the bottom of the
signpost identify the
name of
organization behind
this ambitious
project: Hayovel.

Founded and run by
U.S. evangelicals,
Hayovel has for
many years been
strongly aligned
with the Israeli
settler movement.
But until now, most
of its efforts have
been focused on
recruiting Christian
volunteers to
harvest grapes at
Jewish-owned
vineyards in the
settlements.

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Greening Israel is
the organization's
first solo project in
the West Bank.

To move ahead with
the next big phase,
Hayovel recently
launched a
fundraising
campaign. According
to the latest update
sent out to its
mailing list, the
organization is
almost halfway to its
goal of raising
enough money to
plant 3,000 trees in
the West Bank by the
end of the year.

**Inside the
Evangelical Money
Flowing Into the
West Bank**

**While Most Jews
Can't Enter Israel,
Evangelicals Let in
to Volunteer in
Settlements**

**More U.S. Jews
moved to West
Bank settlements
in 2021 than any
other year in past
decade**

The plan thereafter is to plant 20,000 trees – equivalent to about 1,000 dunams, or 247 acres, of land – every year at sites “located throughout Israel’s central mountain range in the regions of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank],” according to the project website.

Hayovel is registered as a 501c3 nonprofit in the United States, which means all donations to this project are tax-deductible.

The forest funded by the Norwegians in the first phase of this project is being described as a “test plot.” Some 2,000 assorted trees were planted there two years ago, in order to see which would take best to the arid soil. Foreign experts were brought in for consultation, and about 100 Christian volunteers from around the world participated in the planting.



A view of the forest across from the Har Bracha settlement in the West Bank. Credit: Judy Maltz

But this land is not owned by these evangelicals. Nor does it belong to the settlers of Har Bracha. Virtually the

entire plot,
according to one of
Israel's foremost
experts on West
Bank land, belongs
to Palestinian
farmers from the
village of Burin,
situated just east of
the forest.

"In my 20 years of
working in the West
Bank, I have
confronted
innumerable
instances of Jews
stealing Palestinian
land, but never
before a case of
Christians from the
United States
stealing Palestinian
land," said Kerem
Navot founder Dror
Etkes, whose
nonprofit monitors
and researches
Israeli land policy in
the West Bank.

Etkes is able to make
this determination

based on information his organization has elicited from the Civil Administration (the Israeli authority that carries out civilian policy in the West Bank) through a Freedom of Information Act inquiry, as well as aerial photos the organization has commissioned over the years.

As a matter of practice, the Civil Administration, which operates under the auspices of the Israeli army's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, does not respond to questions regarding jurisdiction over West Bank land.

According to Etkes,

the aerial photos indicate that the land in question had been intensively cultivated until the second intifada in the early 2000s.

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“Clearly, the reason it has been left uncultivated in recent years – and, therefore, ideal for a land grab of this sort – is that the Palestinian owners have been denied access to their land, both by the settlers of Har Bracha and the Israeli military,” he said.





An aerial photograph
commissioned by Kerem Navot,
superimposed on a map
provided to the organization by
the Civil Administration. The
picture shows that the forest,
demarcated in red, is not part of
declared state lands. Credit:
Kerem Navot

One of the questions
featured in the FAQ
section of the new
Greening Israel
website is whether
Hayovel has legal
rights to the land
where the trees are
being planted.

This was Hayovel's
response: "We do
not own any of the
land where we plant
trees. We work
closely with
individual farmers,
local Jewish
communities, and
local municipality
governments. Most
of the Greening
Israel Project

forestry sites are located on land owned and controlled by the State of Israel."

This is not the case at all, said Etkes, who visited the site last week with this reporter to confirm his initial findings.

According to his calculation, at most 10 percent of the forest is on 'state land' – the term used for West Bank land declared as such by Israel, and which Israel is responsible for administering.

Asked for comment, a spokeswoman for COGAT said that planting on state land over the Green Line (the armistice demarcation line prior to the Six-Day War that separates

Israel from the West Bank) is prohibited without permits from the Civil Administration. “In the case you refer to, we have never been approached,” she said.

But Hayovel founder Tommy Waller said this week in a conversation with Haaretz that he “obviously” had permission “from a lot of different sources and a lot of different agencies.” He would not specify which.

“We’re not just going out and taking whatever land we want,” he said.

When asked if he was aware that most of the plot near Har Bracha, where the pilot forest had been

planted, was privately owned by Palestinians from Burin, he said: “From our perspective, they don’t have jurisdiction over that land.”

Presented with a map of the area, Burin resident Bashar Eid was able to name several families, including his own, whose land he said had been appropriated for the forest. “Twelve dunams out there is mine,” he said, “but I have no way of getting to it anymore.”

Waller said his organization had still not finalized where exactly it planned to plant additional forests, but insisted it would

stay away from
cultivated areas.

"I don't want you to think we're some sort of evil people who want to hurt Palestinians," he said. "That's not who we are. We're just all about the land. For us, seeing the land come alive is what the prophets spoke about, and this is like a biblical mandate for us."

Although Hayovel never bothered to obtain the necessary permits for the Greening Israel Project from the relevant parties, as this investigation reveals, the organization has been promising funders that their trees will be planted within six months of the day their

donation is received.

The organization is
charging \$25 for
each tree.

Security dogs, army ops

Based in Patterson,
Missouri, Hayovel
has brought
thousands of
evangelical
volunteers – mainly
from the United
States – to West
Bank settlements
over the past 15
years. The
organization has a
campus on Har
Bracha where Waller
and his family live
and where
volunteers receive
accommodations.

The organization
works only in “the
biblical heartland” –
as it prefers to
describe the West
Bank. Although most

of the international community does not consider the West Bank to be part of Israel, Hayovel describes its mission, on forms filed with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, as “to serve and support agricultural communities in Israel.”

In a press release issued several month ago unveiling the Greening Israel Project, Hayovel noted that what distinguished it from other forestry projects in the Holy Land was that the others refrained from planting trees near the settlements “because of politics and international pressure.”

“One of Hayovel’s

main beliefs is that Judea and Samaria are part of Israel's biblical heartland, which is why they are focusing their tree-planting efforts specifically in these areas," it said.

Even the Jewish National Fund, long famous for its massive forestry projects around Israel, avoids tree-planting in the West Bank (although it is heavily engaged in land purchases there).

It is inconceivable that Hayovel would be able to pull off a project of this nature, Etkes believes, without the support and cooperation of the Har Bracha settlers. But when approached by

Haaretz, Yaakov Weinberger, the spokesman of this militant West Bank settlement, said this was the first he had heard of Greening Israel.

Volunteers from Hayovel working on a vineyard in the West Bank, 2018 Credit: Kyle S Mackie

“I had to do a google search to see what you were talking about,” he said. “I know the people from Hayovel. They’re great people, but this is not our project and it’s not being done in coordination with us.”

At the time of its launch, Hayovel released a 30-minute documentary

film for fundraising purposes. The film chronicles various attempts by outsiders to uproot the trees and burn down the forest planted across from Har Bracha. To prevent further acts of sabotage, the Christian group acquired two security dogs in December 2020.

When these dogs went missing a few weeks later, the Wallers got Israeli soldiers to enter Burin in the middle of the night to search for them. The film documents the Wallers receiving live updates from the military on the progress of the operation. The dogs were never found.

T. Sormin



When asked whether the organization often asks the army to enter Palestinian villages on their behalf, the family patriarch said this was unprecedented.

“It was a unique situation,” he said, adding that his children were very upset about losing their dogs.

Asked for comment, the IDF spokesman’s office said: “Because of the time that has passed, we were unable to find details about this incident.

IDF forces operate around Judea and Samaria in accordance with their assessments of the situation and in accordance with operational

considerations aimed at providing security to residents of the area."

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