

ACTIVITY REPORT TO THE NIWANO PEACE FOUNDATION

Title of the Project: Dialogue in the Olive Groves: Bringing Israelis and Palestinians together to promote peace and defend Human Rights

Introduction

Rabbis for Human Rights has succeeded in improving the situation on the ground for Palestinian landowners and farmers in the Northern and Southern West Bank for more than a decade. Our yearly olive harvest and tree planting campaign is an integral part of this work.

Each year during the fall and winter months RHR staff coordinate harvest and planting days with the army ensuring that Palestinian farmers can access their lands without fear that the army will force them to leave before the work is done or forbid them from entering at all. In addition, our field staff maintains contact with local Palestinian villagers assessing their needs and responding as and when problems with the army or radical settlers occur.

In areas where there is high risk of violence and destruction of property at the hands of radical settlers we bring hundreds of Israeli and international volunteers to work side by side with Palestinian farmers and their families, harvesting olives or planting saplings donated by RHR, to replace those destroyed or stolen by extremists. Our presence discourages the extremists from attacking small groups of farmers and ensures that these farmers are able to enter their lands without harassment or intimidation. In addition it is an act of solidarity with Palestinian farmers and their communities, encouraging mutual respect and understanding and showing them a more compassionate face of Judaism. Our media team uses traditional and new media outlets to publicize incidents of violence and vandalism which puts pressure on the security forces to carry out their legal obligation to ensure that Palestinian farmers are able to work their lands safely and without disruption.

In the fall of 2015 thanks to support from donors including the Niwano Peace Foundation, RHR was able to coordinate 35 harvest days throughout the Occupied Territories, double the number held in 2014. This year, despite the fraught security situation, 350 Israeli and international volunteers accompanied us on harvest days, one of the largest numbers of volunteers to take part in recent years.

In early 2016 we donated 1,630 trees to farmers who had been victims of olive tree destruction or theft or who were at risk of land takeovers. This planting season we coordinated four planting events with Palestinians and RHR volunteers rather than the usual two. One was held in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Az Zarura in the Negev where trees were recently uprooted by the army and 3 were held in different villages in the OT including in Duma, the site of the arson attack by radical settlers which killed three people in the summer of 2015 .

Background

In Palestinian society olive trees represent a connection to the land. They are a link to the past with ancient trees passed down from generation to generation. The farmers plan their seasonal labor around the trees' life-cycle and the harvest season in particular is a time of much celebration as families and villages gather together to harvest the fruit. According to OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories), olive oil production

contributes to the livelihoods of around 100,000 Palestinian families, making up 25% of the Occupied Territories agricultural income.

Tragically, right-wing extremists are all too aware of the cultural and economic significance of the trees in Palestinian society. The trees are a prime target of attacks. Every year thousands of trees are stolen or destroyed. Thefts and destruction of property occur because of the military's refusal to permit free access for Palestinian land owners without prior approval and coordination. This enables extremist settlers to easily enter the land when there is no human presence on the ground and steal the produce from trees and cause damage. Palestinian farmers in these areas have no way of protecting their property. They are blocked from entering their land unless they receive army approval, they face threats and violence at the hands of neighboring Israeli extremists. Palestinians are entirely dependent on Israeli security forces for their protection and that of their property, it is too often the case that the army either indirectly or even directly aids the extremists themselves against the Palestinians. Additionally, the perpetrators of these attacks almost always go unpunished. Palestinians suffer financial losses and learn that the Israeli justice system will not act to protect them or bring the attackers to justice. In our quest to restore dignity and justice to the Palestinians, RHR coordinates entry for the farmers to their land, protects them from violent extremists, compensates them for financial losses through olive tree provision, and, perhaps most importantly, provides solidarity in the form of compassionate, committed volunteers who come out year after year to help farmers in their fields.

Fall 2015 Olive Harvest and Winter 2016 Tree Planting Campaign

Our goals during our harvest and tree planting campaign are motivated by the following principles:

- Ensuring that Palestinian farmers are able to access their lands freely to plant and harvest without intimidation, harassment or attack. This is achieved through the presence of our volunteers in the field, as well as "behind the scenes" work of our legal department in coordination with RHR's field workers and the Israeli security forces.
- Bringing hundreds of Israeli and international volunteers to the field to ensure that access is permitted in order to harvest olives and plant trees, and that farmers and their families are protected.
- Donating trees and saplings to farmers whose lands are in danger of take-over from radical settlers, or whose trees and agricultural land have been vandalized and destroyed.
- Continuing to prevent and/or address human rights violations in Area C. This is achieved through close contact between the villages, our field workers, and RHR's legal team.
- Fostering conditions to strengthen solidarity, good neighborliness, and the mutual goal of justice between Israelis and Palestinians through shared agricultural work.
- Educating tens of Israeli and international volunteers on the plight of Palestinian farmers in Area C.

Olive Harvest 2015

The olive harvest season of 2015 began just as new round of violence broke out in Jerusalem. Despite the tense security situation RHR was able to coordinate 35 harvest days, double the number held in 2014. In 2015 RHR staff and volunteers took part in the olive harvest in Jamma'in, Ein Abus, Burin, Awarta, A-Sawya, Safa, Aqraba, Atara.

We were also in touch with an additional 40 villages to assess their needs during the olive harvest season and ascertain if and how we could help them. For 10 of these villages we were involved in coordinating harvest days with the army.

This year 350 volunteers accompanied us on harvest days, one of the largest numbers of volunteers to take part in recent years. The increase is due in no small part to the determination of senior staff member, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, who took over as director of the Olive harvest project this year. Once again, our volunteers were a diverse group including elderly volunteers, young Israeli activists, internationals, and rabbinical students studying for the year in Israel. Mindful of the volatile security situation RHR staff carefully considered where and when it was safe to bring volunteers. As usual we consulted with our Palestinian field worker Zakaria Sadah as well as with our Palestinian hosts, who advised us on what was

safe. Furthermore, we were careful to only bring experienced volunteers to locations where we believed problems could arise.

Photos from harvest in Atara



Quote from volunteer Shaiya Rothberg on his experience harvesting in Atara:

“It was a real privilege to contribute in some way to [the Palestinian family’s] ability to join together, spanning three generations, and engage in the olive harvest as they did with their parents and grandparents before.”

Given the wave of violence, it is remarkable that the harvest went so well this year, with minimal incidents of olive theft, violence and tree damage. Despite the overall quiet of the harvest, there were nevertheless a number of difficulties, which we helped to resolve, underscoring the importance of our presence in the

field. Problems encountered included the army's attempts to delay or cancel pre-coordinated harvest days, sometimes as a result of settler theft, destruction and violence. There were instances where the army demanded farmers coordinate with them although it was not required by law, or asked the farmers to leave their plots early on days where they had prearranged coordination. These incidents occurred in situations where security was not a factor, illustrating the army's contempt of their responsibility to fulfill RHR's 2006 High Court victory which ruled that the army is obliged to ensure Palestinian farmers have the right to work their lands for the purpose of earning a living. In some cases RHR's involvement ensured that the farmers were able to continue working and in other cases they had to leave, but thanks to our perseverance the army allowed farmers to go back to the lands on subsequent days and continue the harvest. As a result of the army's shirking of its responsibility, many Palestinians have come to accept that they will access their lands only once during the harvest season despite the fact the 2006 ruling states otherwise. This signifies the erosion of the 2006 ruling and is unacceptable to us. RHR is now redoubling its efforts to reverse this erosion.

This year there were incidents of theft by extremist settlers. For example in October 2015, thieves were spotted stealing olives on land belonging to a Palestinian family from the village Al Janeena, located nearby the outpost Zayit Ra'anan. The theft was reported to police as it was occurring but no arrests were made. Two days prior to this incident, a theft occurred on the same site and RHR staff informed police that the thieves might return. Unfortunately, despite this warning, the authorities took no action to prevent the crime from occurring again.

Another example is of a farmer named Ibrahim from the village of Farrata whose olive plantation is close to the "Gilad's Farm" outpost which is known to be especially violent. For 3-4 years in a row, the IDF has delayed issuing permits for Ibrahim to access his fields until the very end of the harvest season. Each year including this year when Ibrahim finally reached his land, nearly all of his olives had been stolen. Ibrahim used to get some 20 sacks of olives from his trees but now he gets less than one. Ibrahim used to earn a living from his land. Now, as an older man, he must work as a day laborer in Israel. RHR has connected Ibrahim with a lawyer who will try to sue the State for damages. As well as olive thefts this year there were incidents of olive tree destruction in the village of Burin next to the settlement of "Yitzhar" and in the village of Lubban next to the settlement of "Ma'le Levona."

Photos from the harvest in Burin





Thankfully, despite the increasingly fraught security situation in Israel this year, few violent attacks at the hands of extremist settlers were reported. An exception to this was the attack on RHR founder Rabbi Arik Ascherman by a knife-wielding extremist near the settlement of "Itamar" as he assisted farmers from the neighboring village of Awarta in the harvest. The shocking attack, which was [captured on video](#) and gained extensive coverage in Israel and globally, showed what activists and Palestinians themselves can endure at the hands of settlers who are almost never prosecuted for their actions.

There were also important successes this season. After three years of excuses from the army, farmers from the village of Awarta were finally permitted to enter their land located within the settlement of Itamar behind a fence built without permission in 2003. The trees have been in bad condition for many years and there were no olives. But at our suggestion the farmers have demanded that they are granted access several more times to begin restoring their lands. Afterwards, RHR will provide new trees. This is an important means to fight the continuing erosion our 2006 High Court victory. We also had a successful harvest day in Burin despite the army's attempt to expel the farmers from their land as they worked. Thanks to the intervention of RHR field worker Zakaria Sadah the expulsion did not occur and the farmers were allowed to keep on working throughout the day.

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties, overall the olive harvest went fairly smoothly. Although RHR cannot take all the credit for this we believe it is due in part to our strong connections to the Palestinian community who utilize our services more and more in order to safely harvest, and to our influence on the Civil Administration and IDF where we have made some headway after years of pressure. Thanks to our efforts the authorities have begun to understand that communication and coordination can result in a harvest season with minimal disturbances which is preferable not only to Palestinian families, but to the relevant authorities as well.

Amidst the violence swirling around the country, we found that volunteers were eager to join us in the fields. Many thanked us, saying that this was what allowed them to get up in the morning and look at themselves in the mirror. Working shoulder to shoulder with Palestinian farmers in the quiet peacefulness of the grooves was a reminder for them of the world that could and ought to be, giving them some faith that such a world was possible. For our Palestinian neighbors, our presence with so many volunteers was an important reminder that they have not been forgotten, and that there are many Israelis out there willing to take action for peace and reconciliation. As one volunteer wrote:

"Today, I noticed how similar we were. How many times I had to stop and drink tea, how they wanted us to ride the tractor instead of hike with them for 20 minutes up the hill, how they insisted I stay for dinner tonight, how they continued to bring me food every time I finished what was on my plate, and how they simply wanted to live together, peacefully, picking their olives, with no one bothering them."

Honoring our dedicated volunteers and closing the olive harvest season, November 15th, 2015



Tree Planting 2016

Once the harvest season was over, RHR staff began preparing for our winter tree planting activities. RHR's tree planting campaign is a major yearly highlight of our work in the Occupied Territories. In honor of the Jewish holiday of Tu B'Shvat, which celebrates trees, we donate olive and other saplings to Palestinian farmers who have either incurred damages to their agricultural by extremist Israelis, or who face land takeover, intimidation, violence and ongoing encroachment from settlements located near their lands.

RHR staff reached out to Palestinian farmers, assessing their needs and the losses suffered by each community during the year. This season we donated 1,630 trees to the villages of Sinjil, Turmus Ayya, Deir Istiya, Burin, Yanoun, Kusra, Luban, Duma and Az Zarura. In many of the villages, volunteers were not needed. We provided the saplings and the farmers were able to plant them as and when needed.

Although we usually coordinate tree planting events with volunteers twice during the season, this year we ran four such events. With tensions higher than they have been in a long time, we felt that it was especially necessary to provide opportunities for Palestinians and Israelis to work together in solidarity strengthening good neighborliness and mutual understanding. Three planting events took place in the Occupied Territories and one in the Negev, in an "unrecognized" Bedouin community.

Unfortunately, it rained during the entire week of Tu B'Shvat, forcing us to postpone two of the plantings including our traditional planting on Tu B'Shvat itself. Nevertheless, the planting took place a week later in the village of Duma, the site of the arson attack by radical settlers in the summer of 2015 in which an eighteen month old child was killed along with his mother and father, orphaning the surviving young child. We brought two minibuses of volunteers from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to assist us in Duma. The day was a powerful show of solidarity and friendship, albeit slightly more muted than in previous years due to the difficult circumstances that brought us together. We were joined by a current and former member of Israel's Knesset, family members of those killed in the attack and many journalists. At the end of the ceremony, the group read a [prayer for peace in Arabic and Hebrew](#).



Collage from the Duma planting on Feb 4th 2016



Rabbi Ascherman planting with Nasser Dawabshe, the brother of the man murdered in the arson this summer, believed to have been carried out by Jewish extremists

The other two plantings in the OT took place in the village of Luban where there had been numerous uprootings recently. One was especially organized for rabbinical students and other potential future Jewish leaders, and it also included a tour of the area along with meetings with various local farmers. Unfortunately, the second planting was cut short when the Israeli army informed us that it was forbidden to plant in the area we were in despite having previously given us permission to do so. RHR is currently investigating what led to this change of plan.



Volunteer plants alongside Palestinians in Luban on Feb 1



Restorative justice: New sapling planted next to destroyed one

Our final planting took place in the Negev Bedouin “unrecognized” village of Az Zarura, which does not have a school, clinic or basic infrastructure. The Israeli army has recently uprooted trees there, and residents live under the threat of forced displacement due to the fact that Israel refuses to recognize their village.



Bedouin children unload saplings at Az Zarura at Feb 5th planting



Volunteers drink coffee with Bedouin at Az Zarura planting

Staff allocation

Over the last year, Rabbi Arik Ascherman, president and senior rabbi of RHR, has taken on the role as the director of our Occupied Territories department. With twenty years of experience at RHR, Rabbi Ascherman is known for his grit and profound religious commitment to human rights. He is joined by his assistant, rabbinical student Yael Vurgan, hired in the fall of 2015, and our long-time Palestinian field worker Zakaria Sadah. Together with the relevant support of our media and legal team, the three of them assess the needs of our Palestinian contacts, liaise with the Israeli army when necessary, recruit Israeli and international volunteers to join us, and coordinate all the logistics of the donations and plantings.

Conclusion

Palestinian farmers in Area C must often contend with the army's refusal to permit them entry to their lands despite our 2006 High Court victory stating that they have the right to work their lands to earn a living. They also face attacks on their person and property by violent settlers as they try to farm their lands. In the face of these difficulties RHR's work on their behalf is crucial. Without our consistent presence on the ground and the pressure we apply on the authorities, the risks to the farmers and their lands are significantly increased.

Our work provides hope to Palestinians living this difficult reality and a chance for Israelis to better understand the reality of the occupation. We believe that it is in the serenity of the olive grooves, where Israeli and Palestinian come together as brother and sister in quiet dialogue, that the real work of reconciliation and peace happens. With the generous support of the Niwano Peace Foundation , we will continue to pursue this important path.