

REPORT TO THE NIWANO PEACE FOUNDATION ON THE OLIVE TREE CAMPAIGN

Introduction:

With the generosity of our donors, including the kind support of the Niwano Foundation, Rabbis for Human Rights has succeeded in changing the lives of Palestinian landowners throughout the occupied territories for more than a decade. A major component of improving the reality on the ground for these landowners is RHR's yearly olive harvest and tree planting campaign. During the fall and winter months, hundreds of local and international volunteers work side-by-side in solidarity with Palestinian farmers to safely harvest olives in high-risk areas and plant saplings to replace those destroyed by radical settlers. Our presence discourages radical settlers from attacking small groups of farmers, while our media team uses traditional and new media outlets to publicize incidents of violence and vandalism, thus forcing the hand of security forces to carry out their court mandated job of protecting Palestinian farmers while working their lands.

In order to ensure that olives are harvested and trees are planted, RHR coordinates work days with the Israeli security forces prior to each agricultural season and maintains ongoing contacts at the grassroots level with local Palestinian villagers to assess their needs and requirements.

Over the years, we have harvested countless olives and planted thousands of saplings in solidarity with communities who have suffered damage and loss in arson and price tag attacks.

In the fall of 2014, with the help of the Niwano Foundation, RHR brought approximately 165 volunteers to harvest olives in twelve Palestinian villages located throughout the Occupied Territories on fifteen coordinated work days. Volunteers included young people, students, the elderly, rabbinical students, RHR staff and member rabbis, as well as a handful of visiting groups from abroad.



In early 2015, approximately 3,000 olive tree saplings were donated to Palestinian farmers whose lands are at risk of encroachment and take-over or who have experienced vandalism against their trees and agricultural produce in the past. During two highly publicized planting events, nearly 100 volunteers worked side-by-side with Palestinian farmers to get many of those trees into the ground.



Background:

Olives and olive trees carry crucial cultural, social, and economic significance in Palestinian society. With the trees' deep roots and ability to survive harsh winters and dry summers, they represent a connection to the land and provide a source of hope.

Ancient trees are often passed down through generations of Palestinian farmers and immense cultural importance is put on the labour around the trees' life-cycle. This is especially true of the festive harvest season, when families and villages gather together to harvest the fruit.

Economically, olive production constitutes almost a quarter of all Palestinian agricultural income. The olive oil industry alone garners, on average, USD 5.4 million annually and over half of the cultivated land in the West Bank and Gaza is used to grow olive trees.

Tragically, right-wing extremists are all too aware of this. The trees therefore have become a prime target of attacks. Every year, thousands are burned, uprooted and brutally sawed. In early January of 2015, an estimated 5,000 olive saplings were uprooted between the Palestinian village of Turmus Ayya and the illegal outpost Adei Ad, [while at least fifty mature trees were felled in the Palestinian village Yassuf](#). Trees were also reportedly destroyed in Safa, Ayad and Burin. Unfortunately, these crimes, as many others before them, almost always go unpunished.



Photo: Destroyed sapling at Turmus Ayya, January 2015



Photos (above two): Mature olive trees hacked down at Yassuf, January 2015

The blows these attacks against olive trees cause is threefold: Palestinian farmers suffer losses financially and culturally; Palestinian society is shown that the face of Israeli Jews is violent and hateful; and Palestinian society is shown that the Israeli justice system ignores them. It is for these reasons that RHR choose to involve Yassuf and Turmus Ayya in its major tree planting events in 2015. Not only do our donated trees help farmers to recover from their losses, but the friendly faces and compassionate acts of our Jewish and Israeli volunteers offers an important alternative to the violence of the radical settlers.

Fall 2014 Olive Harvest and Winter 2015 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:

In the Fall of 2014, we went out for slightly fewer days during the olive harvest and with fewer volunteers than past years. Despite the difficult circumstances in the region with regards to the war in Gaza, which ended in August, and the wave of violence in Jerusalem and the surrounding area that followed, there were fewer instances of settler violence during the harvest itself and slightly less harm done to the trees and the yield in comparison to last year. There also seemed to be a greater presence of the army and police in the field, perhaps due to concerns of erupting violence due to increased tensions.

We harvested in the following Palestinian villages:

- Awarta
- Jamma’in
- Deir Istiya
- Burin
- Sinjil
- Safa (Khirbet Safa)
- Tel Rumeida
- as-Sawiya
- Haris
- Bil’in
- Jit
- Kadum (Kafr Qaddum)



Photo: Olive harvest in Bilin showing the proximity between trees and the settlement, where ongoing construction continues to eat into private Palestinian land





Photo: Volunteers, with RHR staff member and harvest organizer Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann, learning from Palestinian farmer about his situation

In the villages of Deir Istiya and Kadum, there were problems with the dates that were assigned by the military security due to interference attempts of the Security Coordinator from the nearby settlement. It also resulted in the cessation of work and only as a consequence of our becoming involved were the harvesters allowed to return to the fields to continue their work.

In addition to our volunteers, who went out primarily with a local Palestinian who drives a minibus for us, or with Rabbi Arik Ascherman or Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann in private cars, we coordinated the participation of other organizations including the "Michigan Peace Team" in Burin, the EAPPI (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel) in

Jamma'in, a group of international Buddhist practitioners and activists in Deir Istiya, and various groups organized by a local activist in a number of locations.

Over the course of the harvest, new invasions and takeovers were revealed in Jamma'in, where a tent was erected inside the olive groves, and in Farata, next to the outpost Havat Gilad, where no olives were found on the trees and a new caravan had been set up in the field.



Photo: Volunteer recruitment graphic

Tree planting Campaign

RHR's tree planting campaign is a major yearly highlight of our work in the Occupied Territories. In honor of the Jewish holiday Tu B'Shevat, which celebrates trees, we donate olive and other saplings to Palestinian farmers who have previously been victim to agriculture vandalism by Jewish extremists, or whose lands is threatened by take-overs. RHR coordinates two main tree planting events, one for all volunteers from the general public, and one specifically for international study abroad students.

This year, on February 4th, some sixty Israeli and international volunteers – as well as three Israeli politicians – joined RHR for the major planting event in the Palestinian village of Yassuf, where only weeks prior, over fifty mature olive trees had been hacked down by extremists. Around 500 olive saplings were donated to Yassuf farmers. The trees not planted on that day by the group were planted by the farmers in the days following the event. The day itself was a fun one, marked with solidarity and friendship, with the sharing of coffee and snacks, a study session of Jewish text for those interested, speeches, a media presence, and the planting itself, done by the volunteers alongside the Palestinians from the village and surrounding areas..



Photo: February 4 2015 RHR tree planting in Yassuf, with the settlement Kfar Tapuach visible in the background



Photo: The group enjoying snacks together after the planting

This year, there was a slight snag when the army refused to allow us to access a portion of the designated planting site on the pretext that such had not been coordinated in advance. This is in contradiction to a 2006 High Court ruling. At the time, the Palestinians elected that we not push the army for access lest it sour the good spirits of all, but RHR's legal team pursued the issue afterwards.



Photo: Rabbi Ascherman, president and senior rabbi of RHR, asking soldiers why they would not permit us to plant on the land

On Friday, February 6 2015, RHR brought a bus of students to plant olive saplings in the Palestinian village of Kusara. Earlier that week, the army had demolished an agricultural structure in the village.

Two years prior, RHR's main Tu B'Shvat planting event was held in Kusara because a series of tree uprootings had occurred there, and sometimes at night settlers came to harass the residents of the outlying homes. Recently, things had been quiet.

This year, we had a great turn-out of international students. The event was specifically geared for rabbinical, cantorial and Jewish education students, but all were invited to participate. Many had questions about the "shmita", or the Jewish sabbatical year, in which land is left to fallow and rest and no agricultural work is done. The group discussed Jewish law and various opinions surrounding the planting on lands owned by non-Jews. Additionally, some chose to help prepare for the planting in various ways, but did not participate in it themselves.





Following the planting, the group paid a visit to Turmus Ayya, where 2,000 saplings had recently been uprooted by extremists (photos of damage above).

Staff allocation and roles:

The current staff roles remained as in previous years. OT Director Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann, Rabbinical student and department assistant Jonathan Shefa and Palestinian Field Coordinator Zacharia Sade continued to maintain long-established contacts with more than 40 Palestinian villages in the northern West Bank and Nablus region. Through these contacts, RHR's staff is able to establish which villages are in need or what sort of assistance.

Conclusion:

The political environment in Area C remains extremely tense, with a powerful sense of uncertainty on both sides due to the lack of a significant and meaningful peace process. Land remains at the very center of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

Our work during these important agricultural seasons is a powerful action that shows Palestinians a new, compassionate face of Judaism and Israel while providing a chance for Israelis to better understand the reality of the occupation under which Palestinian farmers suffer. Our presence also has profound effects on the ground itself, preventing settler attacks, forcing Israeli authorities to uphold their responsibility to protect farmers, and allowing Palestinians to safely access their own land. It is essential that RHR continue its work of guaranteeing Palestinian farmers access to their property. Without a continual presence and the pressure applied on the authorities, the risks to the farmers and their lands are significantly increased.