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# Material bleeding: the erasure of Ajami neighbourhood and its evidence on Givat Aliyah/ Jabaliyeh Beach

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In this essay, I look at expressions of historical erasure in the form of environmental colonialism as it appears in the Ajami neighbourhood and on the Givat Aliyah Beach, which is also known in the local Arab community as Jabaliyeh Beach in the city of Yaffo, also known as Yaffa.

First, some historical background: in 1947 the UN adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine, which certified Israel as an independent state and caused the Israeli War of Independence, known among Palestinians as the Nakba.<sup>1</sup> The city of Yaffo, which is an ancient port city on the Mediterranean shore and one of the most important Arab cities in Palestine, was occupied in 1948. It was annexed to Tel Aviv in 1950 after the war, most of its remaining Arab residents fled their homes while the rest were concentrated in Ajami, an originally Arab neighbourhood, south of the old city walls. Of about 70,000 Palestinian residents, 5000 remained in Yaffo after 1948.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the social climax before and after 1948 in Palestine/Israel, see Dan Rabinowitz and Daniel Monterescu, 'Reconfiguring the "Mixed Town": Urban Transformations of Ethnonational Relations in Palestine and Israel', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40 (2008). For an overview on Jaffa/Tel Aviv and the Jaffa Slope Park specifically, see Naama Meishar, 'UP/ROOTING: Breaching Landscape Architecture in the Jewish-Arab City', *AJS Review* 41, no. 1 (2017); Ravit Goldhaber, "'The Jaffa Slope Project": An Analysis of "Jaffaesque" Narratives in the New Millennium', *Makan: Adalah's Journal for Land, Planning and Justice* 2, *The Right to a Spatial Narrative* (2010); Sharon Rotbard, *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, trans. Orit Gat (London: Pluto Press, 2015).



In 1950 the Absentees' Property Law was passed in the Knesset, declaring that any person who left their property in Israel or Palestine for up to six months from the beginning of the war would generally forfeit their property to the state of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Palestinians who lived in one neighbourhood in Yaffo and were transferred to Ajami had no rights to their homes, neither the old nor the new.

From 1949 to 1992, the municipality of Tel Aviv-Yaffo had Ajami and the adjacent Jabaliyeh neighbourhood marked for demolition and did not issue any permits for construction or renovation.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with the city plan, between 1960–1985 the municipality demolished large parts of Ajami and re-evacuated some of its residents. Jewish immigrants were settled in the remaining empty houses in Ajami upon arrival to the new state and were given the option to move into a *shikkun* apartment block (the 'national housing blocks' of Israel) in the new south-eastern neighbourhoods of Yaffo after the citrus orchards had been uprooted. At the same time, the Arab residents were forced to live in the wreckage and

2 Knesset, 'Absentees' Property Law 5710-1950', (United Nations, 1950). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-209845/>.

3 Sebastian Wallerstein, Emily Silverman and Naama Meishar, *Housing Distress within the Palestinian Community of Jaffa: The end of protected tenancy in absentee ownership homes* (Technion - Israel Institute of Technology Faculty of Architecture and Planning et al., 2009), 2, <https://bimkom.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/Housingdistressjaffa.pdf>.

Fig. 1  
Givat Aliyah / Jabaliyeh Beach  
(Image: Tal Hafner)



voids of ruined houses until they were ‘legally’ evicted by various means.<sup>4</sup>

The debris was then dumped on the Ajami coast, accreting into a monstrous district dumping site extending 15 meters above sea level and 200,000 square meters into the sea, which was known as ‘the Garbage Mountain’.<sup>5</sup>

In the early 2000s, an environmental protest led to the site being converted into a park called Midron Park/the Jaffa Slope Park/ Mutanazahun Munhader Yaffa, and by 2010 a beautiful landscape obscured the memory of the underlying layers and blocking almost all direct access to the sea in this coastal town that had survived millennia.

Midron Park is not the first case of using greening tactics – a type of environmental colonialism that, in its local Israeli version, turns demolished Palestinian neighbourhoods and villages into

4 There are three typical reasons for eviction: the death of the initial owner or their legal heirs under certain conditions, illegal renovation or construction (which covered every renovation or construction project because no permits were issued), and failure to pay rent (though many tenants were not aware of the process and lost touch with the representatives of the Israel Land Administration that was in charge of collecting it). See Wallerstein, Silverman and Meishar, *Housing Distress*, 2-3.

5 Naama Meishar, ‘In search of meta-landscape architecture: the ethical experience of Jaffa Slope Park’s design’, *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 7, no. 2 (2012): 12 <https://doi.org/10.1080/18626033.2012.746086>.

Fig. 2  
**Works done to strengthen the Kurkar ridge above the beach where old Christian and Muslim cemeteries lie. (Image: Tal Hafner)**

aestheticised green lungs and national parks for the leisure of the Israeli public.<sup>6</sup> I still couldn't help but wonder – why greening? Why not just erase and be done with it?

According to WJT Mitchell, landscape is primarily a multi-sensory physical medium that encompasses codes of cultural meaning and value. He also states that the imperialistic perception sees 'cultural' and 'civilised' movement into 'natural' landscapes as a 'natural' process, an inevitable historic 'development'.<sup>7</sup> Such movement toward creating the Zionist landscape was based on the concept of 'making the desert bloom' (Hafrachat Hashmama). Another expression of this principle is 'redeeming the land' (Geulat Hakarka), referring to the need to revive the local environment that has been neglected by the other peoples living on this land since the Jews last left about 2000 years ago.<sup>8</sup> The Zionists needed to see the land as almost non-existent so they can turn it into their new homeland.

The notion of 'making the desert bloom' has several potential various historic and cultural sources:

- In the biblical creation myth, on the third day God created the land and then covered it with vegetation, so bare land is incomplete. Generally, the desert is a place of hardship in the Bible, especially Exodus, in which the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt and wandered in the desert for 40 years before arriving to the promised land of Canaan, the land of Israel-to-be.
- Another biblical reference is from Jeremiah, 2:2: 'The word of the Lord came to me: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:  
'This is what the Lord says:  
'I remember the devotion of your youth,  
how as a bride you loved me  
and followed me through the wilderness,  
through a land not sown."<sup>9</sup>
- This is Jeremiah conveying God's words to the Israelites in Jerusalem, acknowledging the people's love and commitment to him before arriving in the promised land and surviving all the hardships of the desert.
- A relatively current possible influence is European folklore and (especially German) forest culture. Until Zionism arose in late 19th-century Europe, the Jewish people were without a country or a plan to acquire one, so there was no folklore about it. Then,

6 For more about such green erasure, see the works of Na'ama Meishar as well as Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, trans. Dimi Reider (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).and; 'From Nakba to Return', Zochrot, 2024, accessed 2024, <https://www.zochrot.org/welcome/index/en>.

7 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Holy Landscape*, ed. Larry Abramson, trans. Rona Cohen (Tel Aviv: Resling 2009), 30, 34.

8 Kadman, *Erased from Space*.

9 'Jeremiah 2:2', in *the Bible (NIVUK)* (BibleGateway). <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah%202&version=NIVUK>

as talk about migrating to the promised land started, they absorbed pre-existing folklore and appropriated them.<sup>10</sup>

- Another current idea about making the desert bloom connects to a broader Zionist motivation to restore what the Jewish people lacked in their diasporic life. This would include returning to the Promised Land, reviving ancient Hebrew as a modern national language and reappropriating the 'Jewish body that was thought to be weak to break from ascription as 'the people of the book'. There are countless instances of Zionists making the desert bloom while reappropriating their own bodies, gaining strength through the hard labour in the fields.<sup>11</sup> Another hypothesis by Schama is that the tree roots were the Zionists' own metaphorical roots. If exile is desert, Israel should be a forest.<sup>12</sup>
- A further process that coincides with Zionism and has accelerated the greening of the country profusely is the reconceptualisation of the national holiday Tu Bishvat. Tu Bishvat is a date in the Jewish calendar relating to the ripening of the crops that had been negligible. But since the beginning of the 20th century, the Zionist movement has turned it into a national planting holiday, a familial happening of planting all over the country.<sup>13</sup>

All these potential explanations help account for why environmental colonialism was chosen over pure destruction.

Afforestation was one of the first and main actions to take root in this land and green it, taken mainly by the Jewish National Fund, and to this day the JNF is reframing archaeological findings to give them a connection to Jewish ancient history.<sup>14</sup> Most Arab villages in Israel were demolished on purpose, some completely disappeared from the landscape, but almost half of those villages' remains have been included in postwar nature reserves and national parks, greened and unknown to most of the passersby on their Saturday family outings.<sup>15</sup>

Coming back to Yaffo, Ajami and the Park, I had no idea about this history of Yaffo, though I was born in Tel Aviv and had lived there most of my life. Only when I moved to one of those *shikkun* buildings and started visiting Jabaliyeh Beach, which borders the southern part of Midron Park, did I become aware of this history. No, there was no sign, no explanation anywhere, but there was physical material that made me start asking questions.

10 Mitchell, *Holy Landscape*, 72.

11 Haim Kaufman and Yair Galily, 'Sport, Zionism and Ideology', *Social Issues in Israel* 8 (2009).

12 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 14; Mitchell, *Holy Landscape*, 58.

13 Amir Mashlach, 'From Past to Present - An Analysis of the Various Sectors in Modern Israel Based on Jewish Identities from Ancient Times', *Social Issues in Israel* 17 (2014): 53.

14 Kadman, *Erased from Space*, 42, 70.

15 Kadman, *Erased from Space*, 11, 68.

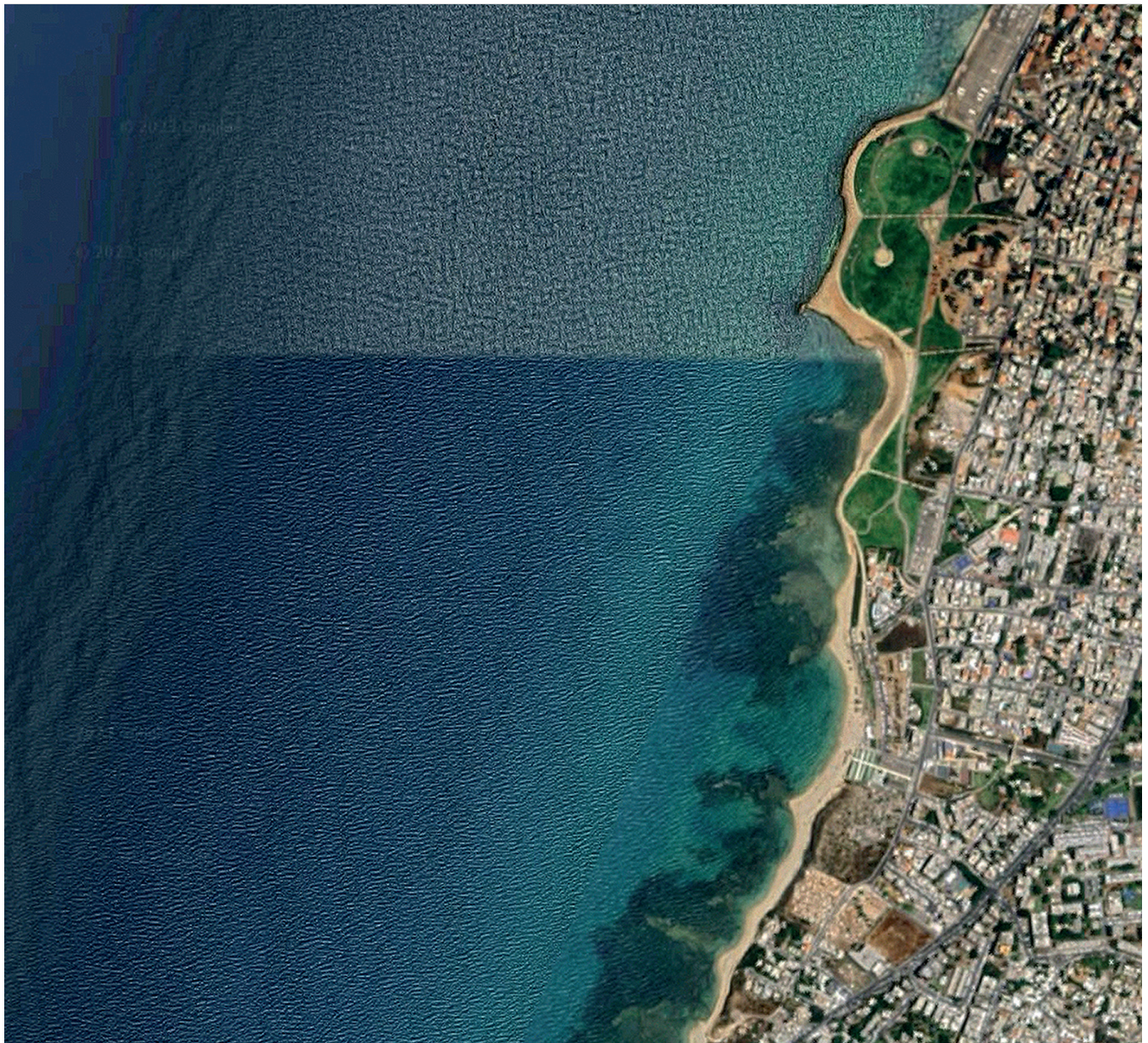


Over my frequent visits to the beach, I eventually noticed something strange: on the sand, mixed with the seashells, lay all this debris of what seemed to be pieces of homes. Some are tiny, some the size of my palm and some bigger, in all shapes and colours and textures, scattered on the beach but definitely not from the sea.

After some physical and theoretical digging, I realised that they came from beneath the park, from what it is still concealing from the time it was the garbage mountain, before it was sterilised and greened. Those pieces were taken by the currents, by nature. They were not dumped there as part of the garbage mountain because, above that section of the coast, blocking the access from the city to the beach, is a Kurkar ridge on which old cemeteries reside that have remained intact since before 1948. These pieces are relics that the park hides – they preserve and recall the absent homes, people, history and culture. They, to this day, carry the city's trauma, because not only bodies bleed; material can bleed too. The environment retains this collective memory of its prior residents, it unearths them, hiding them in plain sight.

My photographs portray some of these pieces from the beach. I can't say for sure whether they are from Ajami, but from what I was able to gather about the architectural history of the neighbourhood, they might be.

Fig. 3  
**Human debris among natural maritime rocks and shells on the beach. (Image: Tal Hafner)**



Though not connected directly, it has become impossible to talk about Jewish-Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict without mentioning Hamas's attack on the Gaza Envelope area on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israeli retaliation on Gaza. No greening is happening at the moment, neither as a colonialist tactic nor as a rehabilitation technique; only wreckage, carnage and desperation. Though not symmetrical in scale, human pain and grief are equal anywhere in the world. I wish to end my essay with the hope of peace, freedom and prosperity for all in my homeland and anywhere on this planet.

Fig. 4  
Current aerial photo of Yaffo coastline. The cemeteries are on the lower third of the image. Image: Google Maps, 2024.



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Fig. 5

**A green tile, a fragment of a home, on a beach, part of what was and could still be a paradise. (Image: Tal Hafner)**



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