

Tree Terrorism in Israel Prompts Massive JNF Campaign

NEW YORK (JTA) — A wave of fires that has devastated Jewish National Fund forests in Israel this year has prompted the JNF to mount an all-out drive for immediate financial help. The JNF needs a minimum of \$7 million: \$2 million to replace trees recently burnt and \$5 million for fire-fighting equipment urgently needed to forestall future disasters.

Arson is strongly suspected in about 25 percent of the fires. The scope of this "tree terrorism" is unprecedented, striking at the very soul — and soil — of Israel.

'A National Tragedy'

These fires affected 25 acres of pasture in the area of Mevasseret Yerushalaim; 50 acres of forest and orchards near Nataf; 150 acres in a 65-year-old forest near Ma'ale Hahamisha and Kiryat Anavim that were dedicated to Israel's national poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik; and 50 acres of the Children's Forest, located in the B'nai Brith Martyrs' Forest, trees planted by children for children who were killed during the Holocaust. In addition, 875 acres of natural woodland were destroyed in the area, including oak, carob, pistachio and pine trees.

JNF president Joseph Sternstein called the fires "a national tragedy and a matter of national urgency." He said

that "it is imperative that we declare ourselves to the replacement of every one of these forests, especially in the face of those who are employing this latest form of terrorism, arson, 14 years after the Yom Kippur War."

Yitzhak Hatuel, regional supervisor of afforestation for JNF, told Israeli newspaper Hadashot that workers from the West Bank who travel to work and return home each day cross the Beit Shemesh bridge and stop to throw incendiary devices, made of matches tied with string around lit cigarettes, into flammable shrubs alongside the forest. "When the fire reaches the matches, they ignite in one blow," said Hatuel. The workers are about 20 kilometers down the road to Hebron by the time the fire is detected, making apprehension almost impossible.

Some Arsonists

The day the four fires were set near Jerusalem, a pilot for JNF, Uri Goldschmit, was on a routine inspection flight when he saw a column of smoke rising and three men running away. Two of them succeeded in escaping, but a third had stopped to change from khaki clothes to an Arab djellaba. Goldschmit shadowed him and radioed for help.

The man was caught and interrogated and he identified his two partners. The three

were from the village of Ararah. They are being detained on suspicion of trying to set fire to Iyron Forest "on nationalistic grounds." That same week, three youths from the village of Bar Ta'ah were stopped on suspicion that they belonged to a gang that set forest fires "on nationalistic grounds."

Two months prior, three youths who were residents of the area around Hebron were caught while attempting to set fire to Netiv Halamed Hay. After several hours' interrogation by Beit Shemesh police, they reportedly confessed.

Said Cohen: "What is devastating — and this is what is heart-rending — is that some of these fires are clearly aimed at touching on the nerves, on the emotions, of Israel. How do you replenish a forest of trees that were planted by children in honor of children who perished in the Holocaust? And the very fact that there was a fire in an area known as the Martyrs' Forest to honor the memory of Jews who were killed during the Holocaust can't be accidental. It's a terrible, terrible blow."

The JNF is not singling out Arabs as the main agents of arson. Many JNF workers are Arab, performing the most trusted and crucial tasks, from planting to guarding the forests. The JNF spokesman in Israel, David Angel, told the press that most forest fires are caused by farmers who burn crop byproducts, un-

authorized and unsupervised by JNF. In addition, there are fires started by careless hikers who toss smoldering cigarettes, or by campers who do not properly extinguish bonfires. There are also incidences of fires begun as a result of army training exercises, in which a single spark from a bullet or artillery shell suffices to ignite combustible growth.

Israel, and JNF specifically, are ill-equipped to contend with disastrous fires. Hundreds of volunteers from kibbutzim, moshavim and other settlements fought the blazes

with hoses and fire-beaters while crop dusters dropped water on the flames. The only official fire-fighting unit that could attend the fires in the Jerusalem area came from Beit Shemesh. Fire-houses in Rehovot and Ramia could not respond to the appeals because they were busy with local fires in fields and woods. Cohen said that JNF is now seeking to establish a sophisticated communications network between foresters and a central post; purchase additional, modern fire-fighting trucks; and lease special planes.

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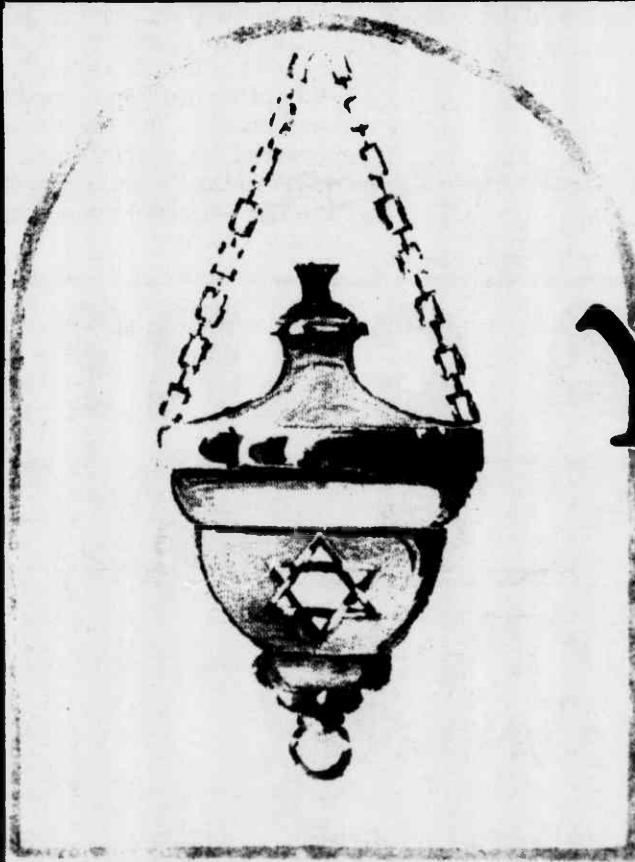
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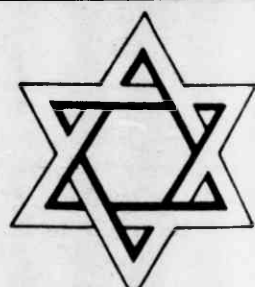
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