The Nabi Samuel National Park is one of the largest national parks in the West Bank. The antiquities site and religious center located on the grounds have become a key tool in the struggle against the residents of the Palestinian village of a-Nabi Samwil. Since most of the village lands have been declared a national park, and the site of the original homes, destroyed in 1971, has been turned into an archaeological tourist attraction, the future of the village, now relocated slightly to the east of its original location, is in danger.

The Nabi Samuel archaeological site and mosque.
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© June 2013
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Emek Shaveh is an organization focusing on the role of archaeology in Israeli society and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We view archaeology as a resource for building bridges and strengthening bonds between different peoples and cultures, and we see it as an important factor impacting the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
Location
The village of Nabi Samuel, in Arabic, “a-Nabi Samwil,” is located north of Jerusalem and outside of its municipal boundaries, at a distance of one kilometer north of the Ramot neighborhood of Jerusalem. The locality occupies an area immediately adjacent to the archaeological site of the same name, and rises 890 meters above sea level. To the northeast of the site is the Palestinian village of Al-Jib, to the northwest, the settlements of Giv’at Ze’ev and Giv’on, and to the west, the village of Beit Iksa. The original village of a-Nabi Samwil was built on the hilltop, around the mosque and the grave attributed to the prophet Samuel.

The location of the village atop the hill enables a broad vista in all directions, and control over all of the main roads leading from the coastal plain to Jerusalem.

Throughout history, the site has been considered a strategic military position, a fact true till today. In the 11th century, the Crusaders first viewed Jerusalem from Nabi Samuel on their way to conquer the city. During WWI, decisive battles were fought between the Turkish and British armies, and in the War of Independence, the Palmach tried (and failed) to conquer it on the night of April 22, 1948.

Until 1967, over 1,000 people lived in the village. Most fled during the Six Day War. In 1971, the village was demolished by the IDF and its residents were evacuated to an area near the hill, east of the heart of the site.1 Today, some 250 residents live there. In 1995, the site was declared a national park, with an area of approximately 865 acres (3,500 dunams).

The park boundaries encompass the archaeological site, the residents’ homes, and agricultural lands that belong to them, spanning many hundreds of acres. From a legal standpoint, the Civil Administration is responsible for the site, and the archaeological excavations are carried out by an officer from the administration’s archaeological headquarters. Responsibility for the Nabi Samuel National Park rests

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in the hands of the Nature and Parks Authority. According to the Oslo Agreements, the site is designated as part of Area C.
Archaeological Significance of Nabi Samuel

Already in the earliest archaeological studies of Palestine, the question arose as to whether the site should be identified with the Biblical settlement of “Mitzpah,” described as the location where the prophet Samuel gathered the people (I Samuel 7: 5-6). This association has not been proven to this day, as remnants from the 11th century BCE, the time of the prophet Samuel, have not been found at the site.

In archaeological excavations carried out on location during 1992-1999 by the Head of the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration, it was discovered that the site was first settled in the 7th century CE. Remains from a large settlement from the Hellenistic period (4th-1st c BCE) were also found. From the Byzantine period (5-6 c CE), a large production house and residences were excavated. The production house and residential community remained in existence during the early Muslim period (8th-10th c). The main findings, and most prominent among the remains, are a fortress and trench from the Crusader period (12th c). During the Mamluk Period (13-16th c) and the Ottoman period (16-20 c) the site continued serving the Muslim residents. A mosque was built there, and the village developed around it.

The remains of the Palestinian village are built upon the earlier layers. Excavations have been carried out now and then at the site in recent years by the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration. A complete report of the results of these excavations has not yet to be published.

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2 V. Guérin, Descriptions of Eretz Israel, Judea (3), Yad Ben Zvi, 1985, p.3 (in Hebrew).
Remnants of the village homes and more ancient remnants at the national park

Area of the antiquities site excavated in the 1990s
Traditions and Beliefs

The Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions identify Nabi Samuel as the burial place of the prophet Samuel. The testimony of Jewish and Christian pilgrims tells of pilgrimages to, and worship at, the traditional location of the grave for centuries. Muslim sources of the 8th-10th centuries (al-Muqaddasi) also attest to the existence of a settlement and worship at the site. The earliest traditions about the Prophet Samuel's burial at this site can be traced to the Byzantine period, a tradition that probably became firmly established during the Crusader period. As mentioned previously, when Jerusalem was conquered by the Crusaders in 1099, pilgrim soldiers arrived at Nabi Samuel, and it was from there that they first viewed the city.⁴

Since that time, Christian tradition has referred to the location as the Mount of Joy (Mons Gaudi). From the Crusader Period onward, Jews made pilgrimages to pray there. During the Mamluk period, a mosque was built at the site. In the 18th century, Jewish prayer was prohibited at the site, and prayer there was permitted only for Muslims.⁵

Today, the basement level of the mosque houses a Jewish prayer area, in which a separate women’s section has also been designated. Muslim prayer takes place at the entrance level. Tradition views Samuel’s grave and the nearby spring, known as Hannah’s Spring, as having healing powers for women experiencing infertility.

⁵ Ben Dov, Yoel, Nabi Samuel, HaKibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 2006, p. 86.
The structure is identified as the grave of the prophet Samuel.

The Muslim prayer compound
Presentation of the Site to the Public

The main usage of the site is for Jewish and Muslim prayer. The secondary use is for tourism. Entrance to the site is free, but it is under construction due to development work that will turn it into a site with an entrance fee. The course through the site is concentrated in the area of the mosque and the archaeological excavations surrounding it. The information sheet handed out at the entrance depicts remains of the fort, the trench, and structures from ancient periods, mainly from the Hellenistic period (2 CE). The descent to Hannah’s spring lies on its northern side; the spring is located in a tunnel that emerges from an ancient burial cave carved out of the rock (apparently from the Early Roman Period). Bordering the excavation area from the north is a Muslim cemetery, which belongs to the village and is enclosed by a fence. The information sheet includes historical quotes only from Jewish and Christian sources. The Muslim story of the place does not appear, with the exception of the history of the mosque. There is no reference to the history of the Palestinian village and its fate, even though its remains are visible in the field and they are better preserved than earlier remains. The quotes are interspersed in the description of the ancient remains, and visitors receive the impression that the site is important to Jews and Christians only.

Antiquities and Residents

In recent years, as stated, archaeological excavations have been carried out at the Nabi Samuel antiquities site. Like the excavations carried out in the 1990s, some of the remains are structures and installations from the destroyed Palestinian village, built on top of earlier remains. Some of the excavators are themselves residents of the village. In the paradoxical situation that resulted, in order to make a living, residents are excavating their own original village and removing some of its last

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remnants. The residents are working together with archaeologists to build a tourist site at the location.

While the IDF destroyed the village in just one day, the excavations are carrying on slowly, under the guise of scientific activity. They constitute an important component in converting the site into an active and exciting tourist attraction. It can be assumed that the village was not demolished in order to promote an archaeological agenda, but out of the IDF’s aspiration to control a strategic location that overlooked the West Bank and north Jerusalem. Today, however, the excavations and the tourist site are obviating any possibility of the residents ever returning to their village.

Area of the national park that borders on the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ramot.
The National Park and the Residents

In September 1995, the State of Israel, as mentioned, declared an area of some 865 acres as a national park. The declaration was based on the protection of flora, in this case, Mediterranean forest, and on the importance of the antiquities at the location. A number of springs emerge in the park, some of which are accessible to visitors. Despite declaration of the site as a national park, construction of the Separation Wall in 2005/6 divides the declared park area.

The National Parks Law and the declaration of the site as a national park create a situation in which the lands remain in the possession of their owners, but any activity in the declared area requires the approval of the Nature and Parks Authority and the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration. Activities such as new construction, adding to existing buildings, cultivating agricultural lands and shepherding require permission from the Antiquities Authority and the Civil Administration. Usually, such requests are refused, on the grounds that they threaten to damage the national park and the antiquities. For example, a temporary goat pen, donated by the French government and erected on developed land, is today slated for demolition (see attached photo), and residents who planted olive and fruit trees on their private lands received written orders to uproot them (see photographed documents). In effect, the protection of archaeological sites and the national park prevents residents from conducting their lives in a reasonable manner, even though most of their activities do not involve harm to the antiquities or to the unique flora.

The Antiquities Law and the National Parks Law make it almost impossible to appeal the decisions of these authorities using legal instruments, since the law views legislation pertaining to the protection of antiquities and nature as the exclusive

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7 The date of declaration is based on telephone conversations with the Nature and Parks Authority, after a search of government listings turned up no reference to a date for declaration of the national park.
jurisdictional realm of the Antiquities Authority (or the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration, where relevant) and the Nature and Parks Authority. The area of the antiquities site is approximately 7.5 acres. Despite this, the Nature and Parks authority declared an area 100 times this size as a national park, based on its unique flora and Mediterranean landscape. A visit to the national park clearly attests that there is almost no flora on these lands – certainly no unique Mediterranean flora. As far as we understand, with the exception of the archaeological site, there is no justification for declaring the site a national park. For the sake of comparison: the area of the national park surrounding the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City is some 250 acres; the area of Sebastia National Park in the West Bank is approximately 60 acres; in Ein Gedi, to protect the ruins of the ancient synagogue unearthed there, only two acres were declared a national park. From these examples, it is clear that there are places where residency and livelihood for the residents can be integrated with protection of the landscape and the antiquities.
The lands of a-Nabi Samwil that have been declared a national park.

Goat shed slated for demolition – the shed was a gift from the French government.
That’s the problem – that you live in the most beautiful place

Eid Baraqat, resident of the village, who was a child at the time of the eviction in 1971, returned to live in his father’s house in 2006, after living for nine years in the villages of al-Jib and Beit Iksa. He knows that residents will not be permitted to return to their homes in the area of the antiquities, but he thinks that at least they
should be allowed to build on their lands. The picture he paints clearly reflects how Israeli policy leaves the villagers with no options: they are prevented from entering Israel and working in Jerusalem because they are considered West Bank residents; on the other hand, access to the West Bank, and even the nearby villages of al-Jib and Beit Iksa, requires lengthy travel on bypass roads.

“Nowhere in the world have I heard of a prohibition against planting trees on your own land. I know that it’s forbidden to cut trees down, but planting?” says ‘Eid, in response to the orders he received to cut down the fruit trees he planted on the private lands in his ownership. ‘Eid tried several times to make use of the land in his possession near the entrance to the antiquities site in order to earn his livelihood. He opened a car wash, which was closed by the Civil Administration; a paid parking area that he established was also closed. The opening of stores and even vending carts selling food, souvenirs and drinks is forbidden. ‘Eid claims that he wants to apply for a business license, but past experience indicates that the Civil Administration and Nature and Parks Authority have no intention of allowing it. In other words, the opportunity to take advantage of the last remaining resource, i.e. tourism, is also denied to the residents.

The combination of the employment problems and prohibition against building leads most of the young people to move to the village of al-Jib and to other localities in the West Bank. To ‘Eid’s understanding, the vista from the village and the place’s religious importance have become a threat and obstacle in the lives of the residents: “That’s the problem – that you live in the most beautiful place.”
Present-day entrance to the Village of a-Nabi Samwil

Nabi Samuel – photograph from 1910
The Israeli Presence

The influence of the Israeli presence at the site began in 1971, when it was decided to evict the residents from the village and demolish their homes. The site’s location, approximately one kilometer north of Jerusalem, and convenient access from the city, make Nabi Samuel accessible to thousands of Israeli prayer-goers and visitors. Most are ultra-Orthodox visitors who come to pray at the prophet’s grave. During holidays and anniversary occasions relating to Jewish sages (“hilula” celebrations), such as the anniversary of the death of the prophet Samuel, which takes place in the spring, thousands of prayer-goers visit the site. The “Shmuel Ha-Navi Yeshiva” was established at the entrance to the national park, and uses a temporary building (a caravan) for its needs. A military outpost, enclosed in a concrete wall, stands between the entrance to the Palestinian village and the antiquities site and includes a military antenna and cameras.

Apart from the Civil Administration, responsible for civilians in Area C, including the residents of Nabi Samuel, the most significant Israeli presence in terms of the residents’ lives is the declaration that their lands are a national park (see section The National Park and the Residents, above). A Jewish settler, who claims to be the owner of some of the lands, resides at the southern end of the village. The residents tell of ongoing clashes between them and the settler, every time one of them passes by.\(^9\) The separation wall, built in 2005/6, partially within the boundaries of the national park, and the blockage of roads that lead directly to the villages of Beit Iksa and al-Jib, make connection to the West Bank even more difficult than it has been in the past.

\(^9\) For example: during the Emek Shaveh delegation visit on May 22, 2013, while we were walking along the dirt road that passes by the settler’s house, a man, approximately 60 years old, came towards us, and demanded, yelling, cursing and threatening, that we remove ourselves.
Summary

A-Nabi Samwil is a village in danger of forced dissolution and abandonment. The exodus of young people, lack of employment, the National Parks Law, and the difficulties that the authorities heap upon the villagers, leave no hope or possibility for development of the village.

From an historical perspective, a-Nabi Samwil is a relatively small antiquities site, with a non-continuous settlement over a period of some 2,500 years, from which the main findings are the remnants of the fortress and the mosque. The Israeli authorities combine the archaeological site with religious tradition, and grant freedom of worship to Jews and Muslims.

Although, ostensibly, freedom of religion is not impinged, an unbalanced picture of Jewish-Arab coexistence is created. This lack of balance manifests in the fact that the Muslims were forcibly evicted from their homes, they are not allowed to build and develop their village, their legal status is unequal to the status of the Israelis, their part in the history of the site is barely mentioned, and their presence is confined almost
solely to the prayer that takes place at the mosque. In the situation created, the antiquities and the archaeological excavations, which constitute a significant portion of the erasure of the Palestinian identity of the village, promote the site as a tourist and religious center, without exposing the visitor to the complex story of the place. Ironically, those advocating for development of the archaeological site at the expense of the Palestinian villagers are preserving Palestinian historical memory unwittingly, since the archaeological ruins that they insist on leaving intact include many remnants from the destroyed village.

A-Nabi Samwil is not the only village whose residents were evicted because their place of residence coincided with an archaeological site. There was a similar case in Susiya, in the South Hebron Hills, and recently, the Civil Administration asked the residents of a minor ruin in the South Hebron Hills to leave their homes, based on a similar claim. The case of Nabi Samuel is unique, however, since it is the first village in the West Bank where the Israeli authorities evacuated residents and demolished houses in order to turn it into an archaeological site. It is also the most marked case of the inclusion of extensive village lands into a national park under the National Parks Law, without any accompanying satisfactory professional substantiation.

It appears, from the description of the residents’ lives and the behaviour of the military government construction supervisors and the Nature and Parks Authority rangers, that the State of Israel views the Antiquities Law and Nature and Parks Authority Law as a tool for expanding its control on the ground, perhaps for purposes of expanding Israeli territory north of Jerusalem and creating contiguous Israeli presence between Jerusalem and the settlements of Giv’on and Giv’at Ze’ev. The residents are viewed as an interfering nuisance not necessarily to the nature, antiquities and flora, but to the political goals of Israeli policy.

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Recommendations

The recommendations presented here are based on the understanding that destruction of the village is a fait accompli, as is the conversion of the site into an archaeological and tourist site. In addition, any proposed solution is temporary, until a political solution is devised which must accompany the proposed recommendations.

1. The residents must be allowed to build and expand their homes in the developed areas in their ownership. The construction of animal pens, the planting of fruit trees, and the creation of paths can take place in the many areas that have no antiquities or endangered flora.

2. Residents must be allowed to develop businesses in the village alongside the antiquities site.

3. Nabi Samuel is a place of Jewish prayer and tradition, as well as Muslim tradition. Both sides have stated that there is almost no religiously based friction, due to the respect for belief and religion. Strengthening the status quo by emphasizing the religious importance of the site can lower the tension between the sides and enable them to live in respect until a political agreement is made between Israel and the Palestinians regarding the site.

4. The area declared as a national park must be reassessed and reduced to the minimum extent.

5. The village of a-Nabi Samwil must be presented to visitors, both on the information sheet and on the site’s signage.

6. Tourist development of the place must involve the village residents and enable them to enjoy the economic opportunities presented by tourist traffic.

7. Development of infrastructure for the archaeological site must include development of infrastructure for the village.

8. Development of the site and the manner in which it is presented to the public must take place in coordination with village residents.