

## The Valley of Hinnom

### Trees and Flowerbeds in the Political Struggle over East Jerusalem

#### Preface

This paper focuses on the recent wave of touristic development in the Valley of Hinnom in Jerusalem jointly undertaken by the Israeli authorities and the right-wing Elad Foundation. The objective of these ventures is to expand control over the Historic Basin with the result of sidelining the Palestinians in the area. Like the City of David, these tourism schemes deliver a highly exclusive historical narrative.

The Valley of Hinnom is located between West and East Jerusalem. Its western section is inside sovereign Israel, a portion of the valley is known as no-man's land while its eastern part is in the Occupied Territories. On the Palestinian side to the south, it borders the neighborhood of Abu Tor, to the northeast it abuts the neighborhoods of Wadi Hilweh and Wadi Rababa in Silwan, and to the southeast it meets Al-Bustan, another neighborhood in Silwan (see map at end).

The Valley of Hinnom is part of the Jerusalem Walls National Park, and in recent years has seen a surge in tourism development. We have previously published a number of [updates](#) regarding the plans for the area such as the [cable car](#) and the [suspension bridge](#). In 2018, the Jerusalem Municipality issued [gardening orders](#) for a large parcel of land in the valley, thus acquiring the rights to develop the area. In 2019, the Elad Foundation opened a [café](#) in the area called Bayit Ba'Gai (A House in the Valley). The café is located at the edge of Abu Tor and while it does not attract many visitors, Elad uses it as a venue for weddings and performances.



Valley of Hinnom and Silwan looking east (photo from 2019 prior to construction of the Center for Ancient Agriculture)

### **The Politicization of Trees and Flowerbeds**

Throughout 2020-2021, the Nature and Parks Authority and the Elad Foundation have been conducting works on a center that teaches ancient agricultural methods and crafts such as winemaking, olive oil production, stone carving and more. Some of the land for this enterprise was acquired through the gardening orders. The entrance to the project's visitors center is located in the heart of the valley, beneath the Elad Foundation's café. In 2021, a fence was built around the center and gates were set up at the entrance. The fence and gates serve, in essence, to indicate to the public who is in charge. In response to a query from Emek Shaveh as to why these public areas of the national park were demarcated and closed off, the Nature and Parks Authority stated that the area is open to the general public during operating hours and is closed only during times when there is no activity. The area along the route from the center to the Sambuski Jewish cemetery at the edge of Silwan in the Wadi Rababa neighborhood has also undergone landscape development including the creation of agricultural terraces.



Entrance to the Center for Ancient Agriculture which features the Elad Foundation's Logo

In an agreement signed between Elad and the Nature and Parks Authority, Elad committed to investing five million ILS to develop the valley, in exchange for which it would receive the rights to operate the Center for Ancient Agriculture. Elad is investing millions of shekels in the project, and in exchange it receives control over an expansive area of open land (according to our calculations, approximately 120 dunams (30 acres) of uninhabited land in the Valley of Hinnom). In visits made to the Center for Ancient Agriculture we encountered employees of the Elad Foundation but none from the Nature and Parks Authority.

The southern end of the valley features impressive rock-carved tombstones dated to the Second Temple period (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE to 1<sup>st</sup> century CE) and [antiquities sites](#) such as tombs from the Roman and Byzantine eras (2<sup>nd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), as well as the "House of Bones" identified with a burial compound from the Crusader-Mamluk period (12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries). The assumption is that in the future, the tourist route will include a visit to at least some of these sites.



A Taboon oven at the Center for Ancient Agriculture

The creation of a network of tourist sites and paths linking them has allowed the Elad Foundation to take over areas linking West and East Jerusalem at two strategic points: The area under development encompasses the Samsuki cemetery to the northeast followed by a descent to the lower section of the City of David site, also operated by the Elad Foundation. The eastern edge of the valley borders on the Al-Bustan neighborhood of Silwan which is scheduled to be integrated into the municipal plans to turn the neighborhood, or at least a considerable portion of it, into a park designed to look like the biblical "[Garden of the King](#)".



Works in progress on the Center for Ancient Agriculture

## Curating Heritage and Tradition

For decades, the residents of Abu Tor and Silwan worked the agricultural plots in the Valley of Hinnom. The new Center for Ancient Agriculture replaces the agricultural landscape created by the local Palestinian residents with an artificial ancient landscape created by the Elad Foundation. Palestinian agriculture has been supplanted by a tourism initiative that simulates ancient agricultural methods, and the Palestinians have been replaced by settlers. The experience for the tourist of engaging in ancient farming practices in essence generates a new historical narrative for the site. In the bible, the Valley of Hinnom is identified with the worship of the god Molekh. In archaeological terms it is a section of the ring of land that encircled Jerusalem which throughout time served mainly as burial grounds. However, the narrative created by the Nature and Parks Authority and Elad highlights the story of Abraham and his journey through the valley to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah on the site of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif [the Noble Sanctuary]. The olive trees and the terraces are intended to evoke a biblical landscape and an experience of being immersed in a biblical space. The Palestinians who live in the area in the present, on the other hand, are neither mentioned nor seen. Even the agricultural tradition identified with their way of life has been appropriated by the authorities and the Elad Foundation.

## The Shalem plan - A network of historical-touristic sites

Touristic development in the Old City basin aims to expand touristic routes beyond the Old City and the City of David Archaeological Park. This process began around two decades ago, however, it has been accelerated in recent years, mainly in the wake of the government mandated "[Shalem Plan](#)" to create a continuum of tourism sites between the Old City and the belt which surrounds it. The creation of the tourism ring is intended not only to expand the settlements, but also to create an expanse of multiple Jewish sites around the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and in order to isolate it from the surrounding Palestinian neighborhoods and from the built-up material culture left by 1,300 years of Islamic rule in the city.

The short route begins with a visit in the City of David and continues to the Western Wall Plaza and the Old City. The expanded route includes the Valley of Hinnom, as part of the simulation of an ancient landscape, walking routes to the City of David, and a visit to graves from the Second Temple period located in this area. The tours that the Elad Foundation offers focus on stories of the biblical forefathers, other biblical tales and of course the Second Temple period. In the Valley of Hinnom, the ancient

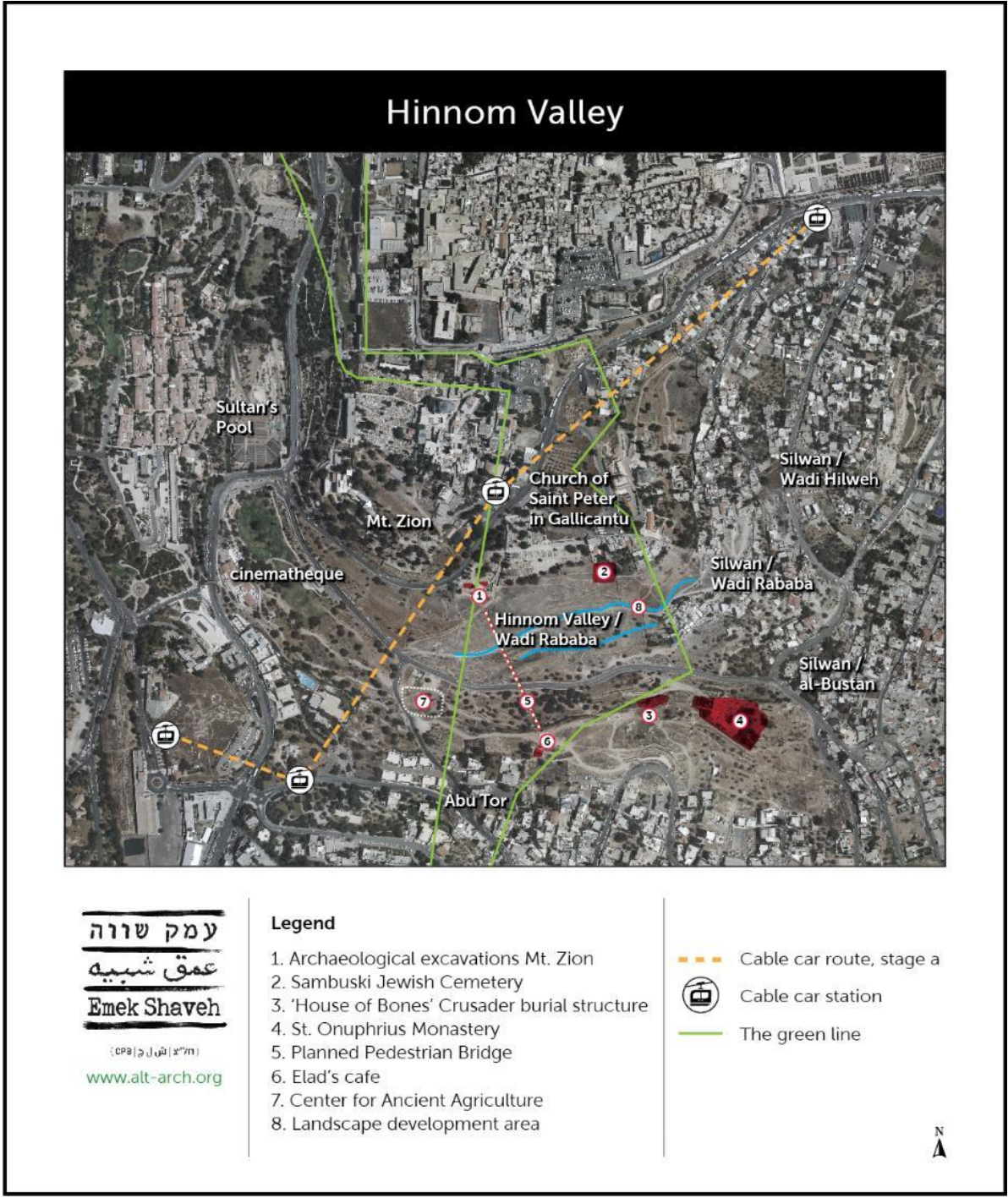
landscape and the stories of the forefathers are emphasized, in the City of David stories of King David are recounted, and other sites in Silwan/City of David are presented as part of the route of Jewish pilgrims during the Second Temple period. To the north of the Al-Bustan neighborhood is the open area of the Kidron stream. In this area there are elaborate tombs from the Second Temple period – Yad Avshalom, the Tomb of B’nei Hezir and the Tomb of Zechariah.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The nature of the tourism-settlement activity in the Valley of Hinnom conducted jointly by Elad and government authorities is familiar to us from the City of David/Silwan. The series of joint ventures such as the café, the Center for Ancient Agriculture and the cable car in effect hand over large expanses of land to the settlers of the Elad Foundation under the guise of tourism. Although unlike Silwan, the valley is sparsely populated, the activity there must be viewed as an integral part of the struggle for the Old City Basin of Jerusalem and as a means to clear this highly strategic area from the presence of Palestinians.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize the following points:

1. Development in East Jerusalem is almost always driven by political objectives. Recent developments in the Valley of Hinnom are part of the grand plan to change the character and the landscape of the Old City Basin and ought to be considered an integral component of the settlement enterprise in the Palestinian neighborhoods surrounding the Old City.
2. Halting the destructive development schemes in the areas surrounding the Old City is vital in order to preserve Jerusalem as a multicultural historic city and is indirectly essential for safeguarding the status quo at the holy places.
3. The Palestinian protests against the expansion of the settlers’ grip over the open spaces such as the Hinnom Valley is part of the struggle by the residents of Silwan and the surrounding neighborhoods to preserve the character of their neighborhoods. In our view, one ought to view the various activities by the settlers and the authorities in the Historic Basin such as the expulsion of residents from their homes, taking over land and the shaping of a historic narrative as part of the same general bid to cement their control over the Historic Basin.






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**Legend**

1. Archaeological excavations Mt. Zion
2. Sambuski Jewish Cemetery
3. 'House of Bones' Crusader burial structure
4. St. Onuphrius Monastery
5. Planned Pedestrian Bridge
6. Elad's cafe
7. Center for Ancient Agriculture
8. Landscape development area

-  Cable car route, stage a
-  Cable car station
-  The green line

