

## Bridge over dirty water

The Kidron River was once Israel's link between city and the desert. Today, it is a putrid, waste-infused channel that suffocates both Israel and the West Bank with its stench. Can this waterway be saved?

By Moshe Gilad | Haaretz Nov.05, 2012 | 9:30 AM



The sewage of the Kidron flows through the channel, in the open air, passing below the monastery and announcing itself by its stink. Photo by Gil Cohen Magen

The Mar Saba monastery perches on a cliff above the Kidron River in the heart of a sprawling desert, about 10 kilometers east of Jerusalem. A monk in a black robe leans on the fence of a broad terrace and stares out at the lovely view. Several meters beneath us, the streambed's running water gurgles.

But while the eyes feast, the nose crinkles. The beauty of the scene comes with a beast of a stench, and it is only politeness in the presence of the monk that keeps me from holding my nose.

The water, which churns swiftly eastward, is covered in a white foam. It's wastewater, it's untreated, and it's the sewage-filled result of one-third of Jerusalem's population and the communities east of it. It flows through the channel, in the open air, passing below the monastery and announcing itself by its stink.

Some of the streambed passes through the Jerusalem, some through the Palestinian Authority and some through the territories in the West Bank under the control of the Civil Administration. The complex, curving route of the Kidron channel, the political mess

surrounding it and the unshakable controversies that flow along with it have earned it the dubious hallmark of "most polluted stream in Israel." But this does the Kidron River a terrible injustice.

Archaeologist Avner Goren has accompanied me to Mar Saba, and he is agitated.

"People don't know a thing about it," he says of the river, which he insists is rife with historical, religious and cultural significance. For thousands of years, he tells me, the corridor – which connects Jerusalem's Old City with the Dead Sea – served as a travel route from the city to the desert. It is the bridge between water and sand, between the past and the present, between high mountains the lowest place on earth.

"This is an important corridor and it's been forgotten for decades," he tells me. "We've turned it into a sewage canal, and it has to stop. We need to give it the honor it deserves."

The Kidron River, he says, needs to be restored.

Professor Richard Laster of the Hebrew University would agree. In December, 2009 Laster, a lawyer who specializes in environmental issues, established a steering committee to coordinate with local authorities and government ministries to clean up the stream.

His team includes some of the best planners, architects and landscape planners in Israel, as well as Palestinians living both in East Jerusalem and across the separation fence.



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Palestinian and Israeli members of Engineers Without Borders are also involved.

### **An off-the-wall, impossible project**

A committee directed by Laster's group led the creation of a master plan for the Kidron basin, and the trick is now implementing it.

The Kidron River, Laster tells me, crosses borders, and thus needs to be treated as an international issue. The waterway is an integrated whole with complex parts. Look closely at the Kidron basin, Laster says, and you will see the whole Middle East: an area with gigantic problems, linked to both human dignity and respect for the environment. When it comes to the river, he says, that respect and dignity has vanished. The effluent chugging through the channel not only poses a health risk to the tens of thousands of area residents, but also stymies the development of the region's tourism and economy.

The rehabilitation and development plan of Laster and his team seems simple. They want to rehabilitate the stream, and in doing so restore honor to the people living beside it and the organizations connected to it. They are being funded by the Dead Sea Drainage Authority, the Jerusalem municipality and several other organizations.

"It's an impossible project – and that's why it's interesting," says Laster.

### **Think outside the idiot box**

A side benefit, Laster hopes, will be the breaking down of political barriers.

"There are different groups involved with the basin – residents, local authorities, organizations, Jews, Christians and Muslims. We're giving them a way to climb out of the idiotic boxes they've built for themselves," he says. "For decades, everybody dug their heels into their own positions and wouldn't budge. But now there's no choice. They have to look at the issue in a new way that's broader and more open, a way that enables dialogue and problem-solving."

Later, he strikes a less professorial tone. "Everybody's fighting over the crap, and nobody's doing anything about it. All of a sudden they care who cleans up the crap?"

### **Bring a perfumed hanky**

On November 8 and 9, at the 10th anniversary conference of the Israel Association of Landscape Architects, a plan to rehabilitate the Kidron will be presented. The conference will include a hike along the Jerusalem segment of the Kidron River, and those who choose to trek have been advised to bring along scented handkerchiefs to help them handle the stench.

### **A river runs through it**

Hours before we arrived at the reeking terrace of the Mar Saba monastery, we stood on another overlook, this one at the new Golden Promenade in southeastern Jerusalem across from the neighborhood of Armon HaNatziv. You could see the sources of the river: from Mount Scopus, through the Garden of Gethsemane to the foot of the Mount of Olives, and then through the East Jerusalem village of Silwan, the Jabel Mukaber neighborhood, and further out, in the direction of Arab al-Zawahra.

The separation fence stands out against the skyline, and my guides show how the river leads straight to it. Beyond the barrier are Palestinian communities under the responsibility of the Israel Defense Forces' Civil Administration and communities such as Ubeidiya, where 13,000

people live in Palestinian Authority territory. East of Ubeidiya, the desert stretches its sandy hand.

Vardit Tsumamal, who is guiding me along with Goren, the architect, says that the river must be considered as a whole entity. The sewage issue, she says, cannot be solved without considering tourism on a larger scale.

"The issue of solving the local problem transcends the conflict," she says.

### **Even an occupation has obligations**

Naim Awisat, a Palestinian living in Jebal Mukaber, has homes beneath the overlook near Armon HaNatziv. He has been working with the planning committee for a long time, and calls the Kidron basin by its Arabic name, Wadi Nar.

The youth of Jebal Mukaber, he says, think differently these days.

"We have less faith in politics. Today, we want quality of life, not politics and talk," he says. "I'm very well aware that people are living under occupation, but even an occupation has obligations. We pay taxes and want what we're entitled to from the authorities: treatment for the sewage of Kidron, regional development, development of tourism, the option of planned, legal construction, road repair, trash removal. We are entitled to these things just like everybody else in Jerusalem."

From where he sits, Awisat tells me, it looks as though no one has lifted a finger to save the stream and harness its enormous potential. His dream is for a private sports club along the river, where area residents and the 65,000 students of East Jerusalem can go.

Standing on the overlook, he points to a swath of 20 dunams where he imagines his club. "I don't want to talk about politics," he tells me. "I want to talk about getting it done. I just want my children to have the same thing that yours do."

### **'The occupation is responsible'**

We trundle into the car and drive for half an hour, making a big detour south that brings us back to the Kidron Channel. We've arrived in the West Bank town of Ubeidiya, and the mayor, Suleiman Abdullah al-Asa, ushers us into his office with a grin.

On the wall are three large photographs: Yasser Arafat, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and the Temple Mount. Two young men serve us coffee and tea while our host urges us to drink. Asa says the so-called open sewer of the Kidron has to be dealt with once and for all.

"Those who have damaged the environment have an obligation to repair it," Asa says, referring to the Israeli government and the Jerusalem municipality. Not mincing words, he adds, "The occupation is responsible."

Later, as we sip our steaming beverages, he softens his tone. "We're willing to cooperate with everyone, particularly with the non-profit organizations and groups that volunteer to

help," he says. In Ubeidiya, the mayor adds, the municipality and local residents are desperate for a solution and willing to look anywhere to find it.

As we head back to our car, my companions point out the distinction between "cooperation" and "collaboration." Cooperation is a good thing, they say. In these parts, however, collaboration has an ominous ring.

### **The one thing on which Israelis and Palestinians can agree**

On both sides of the barrier, there's an agreement that the Kidron River must be saved by building a sophisticated, expensive sewage-treatment plant. Money is not the problem here. Like so many issues in this complicated corner of the world, it comes down to geography.

International organizations have said they will be happy to handle the funding, but where will the plant be located? Jerusalem? The West Bank? Civil Administration areas?

Officials in Ubeidiya insist the plant must be built there and that the treated water remain in the Palestinian Authority. The Kidron planning committee examined several options and would prefer a location farther to the east, in a tiny channel that descends to the Kidron northeast of Ubeidiya, in territory controlled by the Civil Administration.

The Ubeidiya municipality shun this plan, because it means that treated water will flow not only to Palestinian fields and residents of Jericho but also to areas that they, and many others, call settlements.

Today, the waters of the Kidron River flow a long way to the east, passing by the Mar Saba monastery and continuing near the Jordan Valley, where they undergo minimal treatment in pools and are used to water the date palms in the Jordan Valley. If the treated water could also trickle this far, it could change the face of the entire region. But judging by the quiet but non-conciliatory statements made by Rateb Abayat, Ubeidiya's municipal engineer, an agreement is still well a ways off.

### **A river like the Seine or the Thames**

A day later in Tel Aviv, as the reek of the Kidron River lingers like a vague memory, Arie Rahamimoff and Liara Meron, architects heading the planning committee, explain the importance of persistence.

"The current situation can't continue," says Rahamimoff. "We're missing out on a colossal opportunity here. For hundreds of years, the Kidron River was the Old City's corridor to the desert. Over the past few decades, the city has been developing, mostly westward, while the east has been completely neglected. It's inconceivable that in 2012, Israel's capital sends one-third of its sewage to the Kidron."

He tells me later that it won't be as simple as just treating the sewage. "The Kidron River should be for Jerusalem what the Seine is to Paris or the Thames is to London. We can't hope to host 5 million tourists in Israel every year without developing the Kidron. Even now, the overcrowding in the Old City is intolerable. The Kidron will give breathing room to the whole city."

All the project's participants talk enthusiastically about the next stage, once the sewage is gone. That will be the Kidron Trail, a hiking path along which people will be able to trek the Kidron channel from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea – a journey of a day or two.

In 1983, Rahamimoff says, he and two friends spent 12 hours hiking that route. "It was a wonderful experience, but today it sounds like a dream. We need to stay optimistic, and then you'll see it's completely logical."