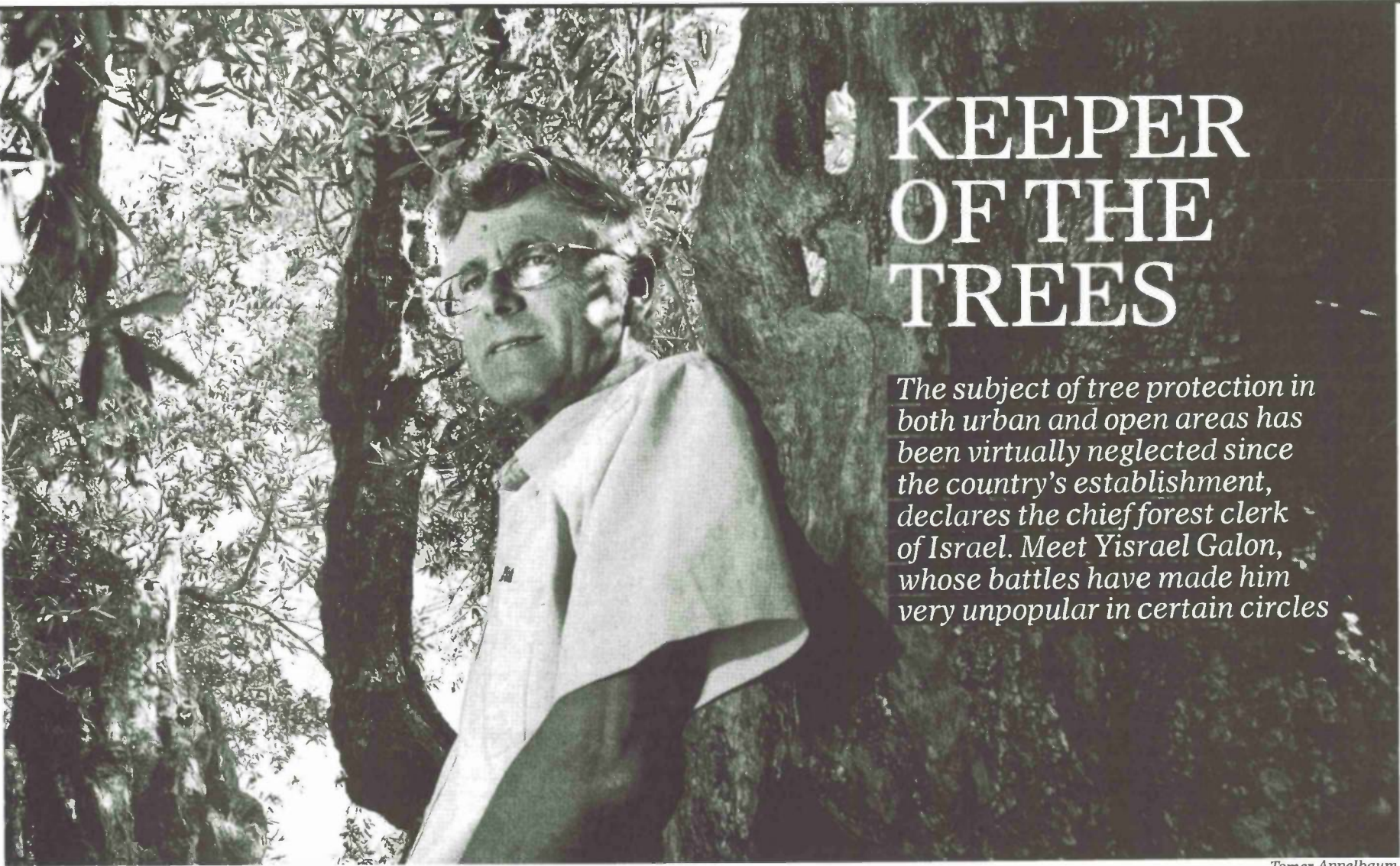




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Tomer Appelbaum

Galon. "One day," he says, "you discover that politics is stronger than any historic tree."

By Amiram Cohen

The office of Yisrael Galon, the forest clerk of the State of Israel, at the Agricultural Center in Beit Dagan, is the last place you will find him. When he is there, he's busy turning down appeals from developers and contractors to chop down trees planted centuries ago in open spaces that are now booming real-estate locations. These are usually sycamore and ficus trees which are obstructing construction of an upscale neighborhood or events venues that will doubtless have such arboreally evocative names as Neveh Shikma and Gan Hafikus.

When he is not battling contractors, local council heads and city planners, Galon is probably visiting a 500-year-old Atlantic pistachio at the Nebi Yusha junction in the Galilee, a Bengali ficus in Sde Eliyahu, or the ancient sycamore that was transplanted from Holon junction.

"I got the job of forest clerk of the Ministry of Agriculture, and of the entire country, in order to change the situation," he says. "Historic trees, dating from the early settlement days in the Land of Israel and also centuries beforehand, had not survived the real-estate steamrollers that trampled every tree that kept them from gaining more space to build on. I took the job because I love trees and believe in their connection to the history of our people, and because I found that the job has teeth. Though it is very unpleasant for me to say this, the subject of tree protection in Israel – in both urban and open areas – was not properly dealt with since the state's establishment, and that's a massive understatement."

Though laws did exist for protection of trees, ministry officials concede that for many years practically nothing was done, and that the matter was left to the care of forestry officials at the Jewish National Fund.

"Following a petition to the High Court of Justice a decade ago, against the felling of trees on Highway 6 [the Trans-Israel Highway]," explains Galon, "the Supreme Court ordered the agriculture minister to appoint a forest clerk, who would enforce the law." Galon, who was appointed two years ago, is the third person to hold the position.

Galon says he and his colleagues have tried to present a proactive front. "The problem with saving trees from felling in urban areas and open spaces is that if no one files an appeal, or tattles on you, or there isn't some resident who finds out and cares, we don't hear about it. The contractors also know that it's better to come to a site early in the morning, before the neighbors are up, because by the time they hear the saw, it's too late. In the past year we have been encouraging the establishment of a large movement of tree guardians under the slogan 'Adopt a Tree.' One of their jobs is to snoop around their area and report to us and the authorities about contractors milling about, and about all sorts of numbers and color markings on trees that indicate a plan to chop them down.

"We were delighted to find that it is very important to residents that their street remain green and shady, and they are also prepared to fight. On the opposing side stand the local authorities, which benefit from the contributions and property taxes paid by the developers of shopping malls, parking lots and skyscrapers. They need the support of store and business owners in city centers, and of market-stall owners who claim that the trees 'dirty the sidewalk and obstruct shoppers' views of the display windows."

Ancient oak

Since Galon has been on the job, the prohibition on felling trees without a permit has begun to be enforced. This was partly due to the introduction of a new regulation requiring planning committees to submit plans involving cutting down trees to the forest clerk in the preliminary planning stages, for an opinion. In cases where the clerk approves the felling – sometimes there is no alternative – he is entitled to demand that the developer pay for the planting and upkeep of "substitute" trees, whose number and costs are determined according to set cri-

teria. If the clerk decides the tree can be moved to an alternative location, the developer must cover the cost of the move.

In two years, says Galon, "I have permitted two trees to be felled, and I demanded a high value in exchange – tens of thousands of shekels and more. I tell the developer: Don't waste your time, this tree is not coming down. You'd be better off going to the municipality and asking for another plot."

Galon, 58, says his professional involvement in tree preservation began 30 years ago, as an employee and head of the department of gardening and landscaping at the Agriculture Ministry's vocational training service.

"One of the first things I undertook, with dozens of volunteers, was a survey of mature trees. I received a ton of information, some of which required verification. Somebody writes to you that he saw a 1,000-year-old oak. What? Where? He didn't say. You send volunteers out to check. Some sites you have to visit in person.

"Some of the sites we documented – for example, the avenue featuring Washington palms at Mikveh Israel [agricultural school] – are important elements in the history of the Land of Israel. Every Tu Bishvat we issue a pamphlet, on recycled paper, incidentally, with 24 suggested arboreal tours. You travel around, you begin to care – and you start protecting.

"Tree conservation begins with education: raising children on the notion that you don't touch trees. You do not carve into them, do not break branches, do not uproot and do not chop down – as they used to teach regarding wildflowers. We started a process called 'Adopt a Tree' with kindergartens and elementary-school children, and we also run conferences for kindergarten teachers, so they will work on creating love and understanding of trees. Caring for trees creates a deep emotional interest. These kids, who in another 20 years will be the architects, the planners, the developers, the contractors, and the mayors, will come to those positions with an awareness that trees are off-limits; that a tree is like a historic building, like a wildflower, like a living creature. You don't hurt it."

Of course, sometimes one has to cut a tree down. Galon describes the case of three cypresses standing on a plot in Tel Aviv: "Someone bought the plot, wanted to build on it, and obtained a felling license. The neighbors filed an appeal on the specified day, but it was too late: Two cypresses had been cut down, but

we managed to stop them from felling the third one. It turned out the developer had had a valid permit for a long time, and we decided to allow the third tree to be felled, but we set a high 'exchange rate' for it – about NIS 30,000, which is a lot for one cypress. The developer was obliged to underwrite the planting, care and watering of new trees at the site or nearby. Certainly at the planning stage the developer should never have been given a permit in the first place."

Holon's symbol

Our tour with Galon begins with the ancient sycamore at Holon junction, estimated to be 400-600 years old. The sycamore is the symbol of Holon, and this one was transplanted four years ago in a complicated and expensive engineering operation.

Initially, the JNF's regional forestry official had authorized the cutting down of the tree, located at the site of a new interchange being planned by the Israel National Roads Company. When Galon, who was not yet serving as forest clerk, heard about the plan, he organized appeals to the transportation minister, the city's mayor, and the CEO of the Ayalon Highways Corporation. Aside from Holon City Hall – which countered that the roads company had been given a permit and nothing could be done about it – no one even answered him.

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“I turned to the head of the JNF’s forestry department, Dr. Tzvika Avni, who was astounded by the story, and said he knew nothing about it,” he recalls. Avni rescinded the order, but the tree still had to be moved, as it was in the middle of the interchange, which was already under construction.

Galon says the National Roads Company eventually agreed to transplant the tree, “maybe because they underestimated how much it would cost them. Following the instructions of agronomist Danny Elmaliach, who accompanied the project, they excavated to 1.5 meters and hoisted the tree with cranes onto a platform that was covered with a thick layer of soil and roots. The total weight was around 60 tons. They moved it a few dozen meters south. The preparations for this took three months.”

Galon says the project cost the roads company about NIS 1.5 million. “It was the biggest and most expensive tree relocation ever conducted in Israel. Today such a transfer can be carried out for NIS 500,000. The importance of the project lay in the fact that it created an awareness that trees have great meaning, and that if they must be moved, there is great financial cost attached.”

Another sycamore that received proper treatment – and did not require relocation – is the sycamore fig in Netanya, estimated to be 800-1,200 years old, likely the oldest in the country. The Arab village of Um Khaled stood there in the past, and today the tree is the glory of the public park on Mintz Street. Oral history has it that Napoleon’s army camped beneath it en route from Jaffa to conquer Acre. Later on, Judith and Moses Montefiore vacationed in its shade; it is mentioned in Lady Judith’s letters. Three years ago the city of Netanya refurbished the park around the tree, but no one touched it.

We move on to Mikveh Israel. Galon brings students of all ages, locals and tourists, to see Mikveh’s hallmark avenue of 83-year-old Washington palms and its Bengali ficus – an enormous tree that local lore says was planted by the agricultural school’s founder, Karl Netter, 122 years ago. The tree is some 15 meters high, has a crown spread of 35 meters in diameter, and a trunk that measures 6.5 meters around. The Bengali ficus, he says, is the largest

tree in Israel: “It is a species of epiphyte – a tree whose branches send roots into the ground and grow additional roots, allowing a single tree to take over an enormous area. Thanks to this tree the whole area north of the synagogue at Mikveh looks like equatorial jungle. You can no longer distinguish the original tree from its derivatives. Beneath the vast canopy of branches and leaves created here, a sort of gigantic cave has formed, which extends an entire dunam [quarter acre].”

Over the years, the Mikveh Israel ficus has served as the source of ficus trees in many other parts of the country, which have also turned into little jungles, notes Galon: “If we had 3,000 ficus like these in Israel, instead of parks and lawns that consume loads of water and do not provide shade – the country would look different. Alumni of the school, some of them 90 and older, say they miss that tree. Even 75 years ago, it was not small.”

From Mikveh Israel, Galon hurries on to Petah Tikva, where he grew up.

“In January 2009,” he explains, “a well-known developer appealed a decision by the JNF’s forestry department to deny him a permit to fell the eucalyptus grove next to Beilinson Hospital. At stake are some 80 trees that are 50 years old – the only green space in the area. The developer was granted a building permit for an industrial structure and an underground parking lot, but in the meantime wants to remove the grove so he can build an

aboveground lot, too. The case involves residents from the nonprofit association Petah Tikva Is Me, who are bringing a lot of pressure to bear to preserve the grove, and are a significant factor in the city’s planning institutions.”

Galon found that although the developer did have a building permit, it had expired, and the municipal zoning plan did not include permission for the parking lot.

“I had tough conversations with him: He said I was getting hung up on details and harassing him. He pressured the Agriculture Ministry, took his case to the chairman of the JNF and tried everything.”

When Galon was approached by the JNF, he says he told them: “‘Friends, you are off the case. It’s now in my jurisdiction.’ In the meantime, the Petah Tikva municipality removed its sign, which had talked about the lovely grove it was nurturing for the public’s benefit. I guess they were sure the business with the developer was a done deal and that he was going to build a parking lot there. Well, he isn’t going to, because I denied the appeal.”

But Galon has been around long enough to know that nothing is ever final. So he suggests checking “from time to time to see if the trees are still there, because there can be all sorts of surprises. For the time being, though, he can’t remove a single tree and he also knows we are keeping an eye on him.”

1,001 stories

We didn’t make it to Afula, but we heard the story about its trees, which Galon says is “the most interesting case I’ve encountered. In the center of town stands a group of 70-year-old eucalyptus trees. Beautiful and healthy ones, close to the famous avenue of Washingtons, planted in 1920. In one corner stands a huge tree that is isolated from the rest. A developer bought a plot there and was granted a permit to build a shopping mall on it. The tree was in his way, and he received a felling permit from the JNF’s regional forestry official.

“Fortunately, Afula has a bunch of green activists, who started yelling and making scenes and filed an appeal with the chief of the JNF forest department, who debated

what to do. Meanwhile, the developer’s felling permit expired, but that didn’t prevent him from getting up early one morning and bringing his workmen to cut down the tree. He had no permit, but he was certain that nobody would notice.

“A police officer who happened to glance out of a window of the police station nearby saw workmen with saws moving around and asked what was going on. The developer showed him the permit, as if everything were in order. The policeman noticed the expiration date, and called a JNF inspector to ask what the deal was.”

The JNF immediately ordered the confiscation of the permit, and of the developer’s tools, and the tree was saved. “For now,” adds Galon.

When the developer complained to the Agriculture Ministry, the case arrived at Galon’s desk. He says he asked the developer to give him two days to review the matter.

“I came there and saw a beautiful tree, impressive, healthy, standing in a corner and not bothering anyone. The only trouble was that it was keeping a developer from building an additional four meters inside the plot he had bought. So he’ll have a mammoth shopping mall – minus four meters. I recommended leaving the tree in its place.”

At that stage, the developer turned to the head of the JNF’s forestry department. According to Galon, “he said he

had domestic problems, and that if he did not build the mall he would commit suicide. He had 1,001 stories. The forestry chief was unimpressed and refused to renew his permit, so the developer petitioned the High Court against the JNF and the ministry.

“Three weeks before the High Court hearing, I get a call from someone who said he saw the tree, and it’s dying. The JNF dispatched an expert to the site, and all the tests indicated that the tree had been poisoned. Fortunately for us and for the tree, rain fell and helped wash away the poison. By the court hearing it had begun to recover. Later on it bloomed and went back to looking great.”

At the hearing Supreme Court President Justice Dorit Beinisch asked the developer why the tree deserved to be cut down. The developer, Galon recalls, “whipped out an opinion by an expert he had commissioned, who wrote that the tree would not survive the construction and would die, and even quoted some JNF people who claimed it was not worth leaving the tree there for the same reason. So she said: I see here an opinion by Galon of the Agriculture Ministry, who writes that the tree is healthy, and as far as I’m concerned, he is the ultimate authority on the subject ... Two months later there was another hearing, attended by members of the district [planning] committee, and in the interim the tree recovered fully. The Supreme Court ruled that the tree would remain in place.”

A few weeks ago it turned out that the contractor was granted a building permit and had begun building the mall close to the tree – and not in accordance with the directives he received from the forestry officials. There is now an investigation under way concerning whether the developer violated the court ruling.

On Shapira Street in Petah Tikva is a giant lemon eucalyptus tree. This is a species of eucalyptus with leaves that taste like lemongrass and a gorgeous white trunk, which sheds its bark twice a year. Many say this particular eucalyptus is the most beautiful and impressive urban tree in Israel. The municipality even placed a sign next to it that encourages passersby to look at it and smell its leaves.

“About 10 years ago,” says Yisrael Galon, “a branch broke off and fell on the car of a lady who was driving by, who happened to be pregnant. There was no damage, not to the woman, the car or the pregnancy. But the agitated woman demanded that the city prune the tree. I managed to prevent the terrible pruning they were planning to do, and to do less massive pruning, without harming its ap-

‘We started a process called “Adopt a Tree” with children. In another 20 years they will be the architects, the planners, the developers, the contractors and the mayors, and will come to those positions with an awareness that trees are off-limits.’

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pearance. Now the city is planning to tie the tall branches with cables, to reduce the risk of their breakage. That is one of the ways we recommend to prevent trees that are beginning to break from endangering the public.”

‘A painful occasion’

Galon’s efforts are not always successful. “One day you discover that politics is stronger than any historic tree. In the Petah Tikva market, they decided to build walls. There was an enormous 130-year-old eucalyptus tree in the way, so they requested a felling permit from the JNF’s regional forestry official, and got it. This was before I became forest clerk.

“Area residents and activists from Petah Tikva Is Me launched a campaign to save the tree, and I enlisted to help them as an expert, but mainly, as a person who cares. I even took part one night in a demonstration they organized. The stall owners held a counter-demonstration and shouted that they had no intention of losing money because of this filthy tree. The residents filed an appeal and lost. I sent a letter to a senior municipality official whom I know personally, and asked him to stop the felling. I didn’t get a reply.

“To my chagrin, I accompanied the felling of the tree, which went on over two nights. It was a painful occasion, to watch them, during Petah Tikva’s 130th year, cut down a historic eucalyptus that could without a doubt have been left there. The circumference of this tree’s trunk measured about nine meters, and in its place they set up three market stalls.

“Six months after the tree was cut down, I ran into the senior City Hall official at some conference, and I said to him, What’s the story? You never even answered me! He said, Listen, Yisrael, you can’t imagine the pressure we came under at the market. You know nothing about politics.”

The Petah Tikva municipality said in a statement: “The felling of the tree was done out of lack of choice, for public safety considerations, and with the permission of all relevant bodies. The former chief forestry official, Dr. Tzvika Avni, by force of his powers, denied the appeal that was filed and permitted the tree to be felled. In exchange, the municipality undertook to plant trees throughout the city at a total value of NIS 100,000, and it is implementing its commitment.”

One local authority Galon mentions quite a bit is Tel Aviv. “One morning a year and a half ago, the tree guardians in the city discovered that the trunks of the Indian rosewoods – the big trees that shade the northern stretch of Ibn Gvirol Street –



Alon Ron

Transfer of the sycamore from Holon. Cost the roads company NIS 1.5 million.

had been marked with numbers in red,” he says. “Suspensions arose that the markings indicated a felling as part of the street’s infrastructure upgrade, which has been under way for five years.” He told the municipality that “I had a conditional appeal by the residents and demand that the trees not be touched. At first they didn’t understand who I was. A senior municipality official rang me up and said that if I thought that because of my nonsense they were going to stop the development on Ibn Gvirol, I was wrong. He told me, We’ve already done 90 percent of the work, we made bicycle paths, sidewalks. What’s this nonsense of yours about the trees?”

Galon explained that he was operating according to a law that had been in place for 40 years, and told the officials, “Start getting used to being supervised.” They went straight to the agriculture minister and requested clarifications. He told them, With all due respect, Yisrael is a regulator, and he does his job according to the law. From hereon in, you must work opposite the ministry’s forest clerk.

“The ministry set up a team to look into the residents’ appeal, and it was decided to authorize the felling of some of the trees. The 15 that were marked would be transplanted. Additionally, the appeals committee criticized the municipality for its decision not to plan the street in such a way as to preserve the significant trees. The preparation for the transfer lasted two and a half months and cost NIS 70,000 per tree.

“Two trees were moved to Milano Square, but unfortunately they did not survive the move and died, and 13 went to Park Hayarkon, and took really well. The municipality planted Bunge’s hackberry trees along Ibn Gvirol, which in another 20 years will do the work of the Indian rosewoods.”

At least one good thing came out of affair, Galon declares: “Because of this case, there was a positive change in the atmosphere and in the municipality’s attitude toward residents regarding the trees in the city.”