RIVER OUT OF EDEN

The Jordan River has suffered an ecological collapse. This is a briefing for Jewish educators and community leaders on what went wrong, why it matters, and how you can help bring back life to the valley.

ECOPEACE / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST (FoEME)
FIRST EDITION, OCTOBER 2013

And he said to me, ‘Son of man, have you seen this?’
Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

Ezekiel 47:6
For the Jewish people, the Jordan River is a symbol of liberation. Its crossing marks our entry into a land of freedom and plenty after the long years of slavery and wandering.

Today, the river has been all but destroyed. 96% of its flow has been diverted. What little water remains is polluted with saline and untreated sewage. The valley’s wetlands have dried up, its springs are failing, and half its biodiversity has been lost.

This is a man-made disaster – one that shows an utter disregard for the natural world, for our own spiritual tradition, and for our responsibility as custodians of God’s earth.

It’s not too late. EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) asks you to join us in calling for a return of water to this river, and a return of life to the Jordan Valley.
Imagine the Jordan River.

In the mind’s eye we see a great river. A river that, as the book of Joshua tells us, “keeps flowing over its entire bed throughout the harvest season” [Joshua 3:15]. When Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan he was bringing them into a land of freedom and plenty after the long years of wandering in the wilderness.

For the Jewish people, then, the Jordan River came to represent the gaining of sanctuary. It marks our entry into the Promised Land. In our myth and memory, this is a river of life.

Until about 50 years ago, the Jordan Valley looked much as it did in the days of Moses and Joshua. From its source in the foothills of Mount Hermon, the river rushed down into Lake Kinneret, and then meandered more slowly along the length of the Jordan Valley until it disappeared into the intensely saline lake of the Dead Sea – the lowest point on the surface of the earth.

All along the way, the Jordan River brought life to the valley. It created wetland habitats in which wild plants and animals flourished. It greened a corridor through the desert, connecting the eco-systems of Eastern Africa and Western Asia and forming a flyway used by some 500 million migratory birds each year. And it allowed the flourishing of human life and the emergence of urban civilization.

Some of the first people ever to leave Africa walked across this plain and drank from its springs. And it was here, too, that men and women first began to plant and harvest grain in the alluvial mud north of the Dead Sea. Farming was the breakthrough that allowed villages to develop into the world’s earliest towns, Jericho among them. Jericho’s walls were built some 10,000 years ago, and it can claim to be the oldest continuously inhabited city anywhere in the world.

RIVER OF MIRACLES

The river also flows through the heart of the Jewish spiritual tradition.

The earliest mention of the Jordan Valley comes in the book of Genesis, where the plain...
“By any measure – ecological, cultural, spiritual - this river must be counted as part of the heritage of all humankind, and as a place of exceptional importance to the Jewish people.”

is described as “well watered...all of it...like the garden of the LORD” (Genesis 13:10).

But it is in the book of Joshua that the river emerges as a place of transcendence. As they prepare to enter the land of Israel, the priests of the Israelites carry the Ark of the Covenant down to the banks of the river. And as their feet are “dipped into the water at its edge” (Joshua 3:15) the stream is cut off –

“...the waters coming down from upstream piled up in a single heap a great way off, at Adam, the town next to Zarethan; and those flowing away downstream to the Sea of the Arabah [the Dead Sea] ran out completely. So the people crossed near Jericho. The priests who bore the Ark of the LORD’s Covenant stood on dry land exactly in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.” (Joshua 3:16-17)

The Jordan, then, marks a kind of divine threshold that the children of Israel cross to gain “a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing...” (Deuteronomy 8:7-9)

From the time of that crossing, the Jordan becomes a river of miracles – a place of ‘crossing over’ between this world and the world to come. It is here, on the banks of the river, that the Prophet Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind, and that the mantle of prophethood passes to his successor, Elisha. And here, too, that Naaman the Leper is healed by bathing in the waters of the Jordan: “So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy’s, and he was clean” (2 Kings 5:14). The Jordan also appears as a symbol of sanctuary in traditions relating to Jacob, King David, and Ruth.

By any measure, then – ecological, cultural, spiritual - this river must be counted as part of the heritage of all humankind, and as a place of exceptional importance to the Jewish people.
AN ECOSYSTEM DESTROYED

Neither the natural beauty nor the spiritual and historic significance of the Jordan has been enough to save the river from being degraded. In just over 50 years, the countries that share this watershed have dammed and diverted more than 96% of the river’s historic flow. What little water remains is polluted with saline, sewage, and agricultural run-off. In places - including the place at which Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan - the river is not much more than a stagnant canal of effluent.

As the river has dried up, the Jordan Valley has suffered an ecological collapse. Half the valley’s biodiversity has been lost. The Dead Sea, sustained only by inflowing water from the Jordan, is sinking by more than a meter every year.

This is not just a tragedy for wildlife. Springs that flowed for thousands of years have started to falter and fail. Wells that supported farms and families have run dry.

Our neglect of this river shows a disregard for the land of Israel and for the promise that it represents, for our own spiritual tradition, and for our moral responsibility as custodians of God’s earth. It is a neglect that leaves us spiritually impoverished, and that carries real practical consequences - crippling the growth of an economy that could be supported by tourism and exacerbating the political conflicts that divide the region. The destruction of the Jordan has caused an ecological collapse whose severity and cost – economic, ecological, human – we are only now beginning to count.

“Our neglect of this river shows a disregard for the land of Israel, for our own spiritual tradition, and for our moral responsibility as custodians of God’s earth.”
THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JORDAN
SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

• The Lower Jordan River begins at Lake Kinneret and flows south for about 120 km before reaching its end at the Dead Sea.

• The Lower Jordan Valley is divided between Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Palestinians have no access to the Jordan and do not receive water directly from the river.

• Until about 1950, some 1.3 billion cubic meters of water flowed through the valley every year.

• 96% of that flow has been diverted.

• Untreated or poorly treated sewage has been dumped or allowed to leak into the river for over 50 years from Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian communities.

• The diversion and pollution of this water has caused an ecological collapse - more than 50% of the valley’s biodiversity has been lost.

• The dying of the Jordan is also causing the Dead Sea to disappear – it is now sinking at the rate of approximately one meter per year.

• FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take the rest.
A FAILURE OF WISDOM

Why has this happened?

How have we allowed this to happen to a place of such exceptional beauty and value?

At the root of the problem is conflict. The basin that drains into the Jordan River is divided between Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Instead of seeing the valley as a single, trans-boundary watershed, these nations have raced to capture the greatest possible share of the Jordan’s water. FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take about a quarter each. Palestinians, denied access to the river, take almost nothing.

Given the intensity of political conflict in the region, this zero-sum struggle for the valley’s water might seem inevitable. But it is, in the long term, an approach that will undermine the interests of all concerned. This is a single watershed: the flow of its water does not correspond to the borders drawn on our maps, and its rain and rivers cannot be sustainably managed through a process of competition.

The demise of the Jordan also reveals a profound failure of respect for the natural and non-human world. We behave as though creation, including its water and all its forms of life, were nothing more than a collection of resources to be mined for human use. This is surely not what was meant when God gave man dominion over the earth. As Avraham Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote –

“There can be no doubt in the mind of any intelligent, thinking person that when the Torah instructs humankind to dominate – “And have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth” (Genesis 1:28) – it does not mean the domination of a harsh ruler, who afflicts his people and servants merely to fulfill his personal whim and desire, according to the crookedness of his heart.”
On the contrary, our special place in God’s creation carries with it a responsibility to cherish this earth. In Genesis the words used to describe this duty are le’ovdah and leshomrah – to ‘serve’ and to ‘guard’ the creation. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written –

“This is perhaps the best short definition of humanity’s responsibility for nature as the Bible conceives it. We do not own nature – “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” (Psalms 24:1) We are its stewards on behalf of God, who created and owns everything. As guardians of the earth, we are duty-bound to respect its integrity.”

The lack of a sense of wonder, the loss of reverence for life, the abandonment of our responsibility as custodians – all of this has contributed to the destruction of the Jordan. The revival of the river, then, requires not just a shift in policy, but a renewed spiritual effort to honor the creation that God has entrusted to us.
The starting point of any new approach must be to see this river and its tributaries as a single, interconnected ecosystem. If we want the Jordan to survive – if we want to use this water to sustain farms and families and economies – we have no choice but to manage it sustainably through cooperation.

“If we want the Jordan to survive we have no choice but to manage it sustainably through cross-border cooperation.”

FoEME has a different vision for the Jordan Valley: a vision in which a clean, living river runs from Lake Kinneret to the Dead Sea; in which the valley’s birds and animals are afforded the water they need to flourish; in which the springs flow as they have for millennia; and in which the water extracted for human use is divided equitably between the nations that share this valley and amongst the people who live here.

This is a vision that reflects the image of the valley that we see in the Hebrew Bible. It is a vision that honors our moral responsibilities as Jews, that shows respect and love for the land of Israel, and that expresses reverence for God’s creation.

Given the scarcity of water in parts of this region and the state of relations between the countries that share the valley, realizing this vision will not be easy. But difficulty cannot be an excuse for inaction. To do nothing is to leave a landscape irreparably damaged by our own neglect. That is the course we are now on.
FoEME is also developing the first cross-border master plan for the management of the Jordan River Valley – a plan that takes account of the valley’s fragile ecology as well as recognizing the legitimate human need to draw on its water resources. The plan puts scientifically sound and economically realistic policy recommendations behind our vision for the Jordan. Key recommendations include the return of 400-600 mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water to the river; an end to the dumping of raw or poorly-treated sewage, saline, and other effluents into the stream; and the establishment of functioning international mechanisms for the joint management of the valley’s water.

With the support of national governments, this master plan can become the blueprint for the revival of the river.

In the last 3 years we have seen the first signs of progress in the struggle to revive the river. Responding to years of advocacy, national governments and municipalities are now working to prevent the dumping or leaking of untreated sewage into the river. New treatment plants are in development in Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian communities throughout the Jordan Valley. If this commitment is maintained, half a century of using the Jordan as a sewage canal can now be brought to an end.

2013 also saw the first release of clean water into the Jordan River in 49 years. The Israeli Water Authority has agreed to allocate 30mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water every year from Lake Kinneret to help revive the river. This sets an important precedent for future allocations, but it falls far short of FoEME’s recommendation that Israel release 220mcm of water, and Jordan a further 90mcm, as part of an international effort to rehabilitate the Jordan.
We believe the Jordan can be revived without weakening the valley’s agricultural economy or causing a shortage of water for human use. In the countries that share the valley, FoEME has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved (see the fact box on page 7) and used to restore basic water rights to the Palestinians, to revive the Lower Jordan River, and to save the Dead Sea.

In the past decade FoEME has opened eco-parks – ideal places to stay and learn - on both sides of the Jordan. We are now working towards the creation of a trans-boundary ecological peace park centered on one of the river’s historic crossing points, on the border between Israel and Jordan. This reserve will welcome visitors from both sides of the valley, providing a much-needed point of access to a river which, for much of its length, remains a closed military zone.

FoEME therefore believes that a living Jordan River can bring prosperity as well as ecological health to this valley, and that the management of the valley’s water provides a practical opportunity for regional cooperation and for the advancement of justice and peace.

“FoEME believes that a living Jordan River can bring economic prosperity as well as ecological health to this valley, and that the management of the valley’s water provides a practical opportunity for regional cooperation and for the advancement of justice and peace.”
Reviving the Jordan River is a challenge that requires real political commitment from leaders on all sides of the valley.

And that’s where you come in.

We need to push this issue up the political agenda – to raise our voices and let Israeli, Palestinian, and Jordanian decision-makers know that we care about this river and expect them to act.

The Jordan River flows through the heart of the Jewish tradition, and for that reason its revival is a not simply a question of politics – it is also a moral and spiritual challenge for Jews. The Jordan River belongs to us all. If we want it to survive, we cannot remain silent.

HOW TO JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

• Get together. Establish a circle of friends, classmates, or co-workers from your community. You might be a group of three or three hundred. It doesn’t matter. Together, you can make a difference.

• Get inspired. When you’ve got a group, you need to tell them what happened to the river, why it matters, and what they can do about it. FoEME can provide films, presentations, and fact sheets to help you tell this story. For faith groups we have published sourcebooks (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) that include scriptural quotations, essays, and sample sermons that you can use to engage your congregation.

• Identify your target. You need to let decision-makers know that you care about the river and want them to act. It is crucial to address this message to the right person. If you’re in one of the countries that border the river, it might be a mayor or minister. If you’re part of a religious congregation, it might be the most senior representative of your community. If you’re outside the Middle East, you might need to address your elected representatives, or the national ambassadors from the countries that share the river. You are in the...
best position to make this call. Discuss it with your group, and come up with the names and addresses of the political, religious, or civil society leaders you are going to approach.

- **Get the message across.** When you know what you want to say and who you want to say it to, you need to decide how to get the message across.

**IDEAS FOR ACTION**

**WRITE**
Old-fashioned paper mail is more effective than email, and personal, hand-written letters tend to have more impact than mass-printed campaign blurbs. Pictures, poems and postcards can all help your letter to stand out. On our website you’ll find sample letters, fact sheets, and stories to help you make the case.

**MEET**
Why not invite your representative or leader to a meeting, so s/he can learn more about the issue and start to work with you on the campaign?

**GET NOTICED**
Organize a creative, peaceful, attention-grabbing stunt to bring the Jordan River to the attention of political leaders. Remember to invite the local media, and to get your message as clear as possible. FoEME has used this strategy to great effect in the Middle East – you are welcome to contact us for ideas and advice.

**LEARN, CREATE, EXHIBIT**
If you are a schoolteacher or faith leader, you may want to design an educational project about the river. This could produce paintings, poems, songs, films, or photos that you can exhibit to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan. Think about which religious or political leaders – as well as which media outlets - you could invite to such an event. A module of this kind is not only raises environmental consciousness; it can also offer young people an education in global citizenship, grassroots activism, and participation in the democratic process.
USE YOUR IMAGINATION
These are not the only ways to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan River. Use your imagination. Make some noise. And keep it positive - you’ll be more effective if you address political leaders as partners, and ask them to join you in this effort, rather than treating them as an obstacle.

OTHER WAYS TO HELP

• **Spread the word.** Use your social networks to call for the revival of the Jordan River. Let people know what the problem is, why you care, and what you’re doing to help. On our website you’ll find videos, photos, and even sample posts to help get the word out – but your own voice is the most powerful. Please tell us what you’re doing via Twitter and Facebook - it helps us build momentum behind the campaign.

• **Invite FoEME to speak to your community.** Get in touch if you would like someone from FoEME to speak to your community about the Jordan River.

• **Come to the river.** If you want to get more deeply involved, organize a journey to see the Jordan River for yourself. FoEME runs eco-parks – ideas places to stay and to learn - on both sides of the valley. A journey like this will equip you with first-hand knowledge that you can use to advocate for the river in your home community. We can also put you in touch with tour operators and local partners (including environmental and faith groups) that’ll help make your trip safe and successful.

• **Donate.** We need your financial support to continue this effort. You can donate directly at www.SaveTheJordan.com or, better still, use your local campaign to raise funds.

“The Jordan River is of enormous ecological, historical and spiritual significance both for the peoples who live in this Land and for those who hold it dear. Accordingly, its revivification is an urgent imperative for us all.”

Rabbi David Rosen, International President of Religions for Peace
• FoEME recommends the release of 400-600 million cubic meters (mcm) of fresh water into the river every year.

• In addition, the Jordan needs to flood at least once each year in order to keep the river’s ecosystem healthy (100m³/sec for 24 hours).

• FoEME recommends that Israel release 220mcm of water into the river each year, Syria 100mcm, and Jordan 90mcm. FoEME also recognizes that Palestine, as a riparian to the river, has a right to a fair share of the Jordan’s water.

• FoEME’s analysis has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved by these countries (primarily through reduction of leaks, improvements to irrigation efficiency, water harvesting and grey-water recycling, and demand management) and used to revive the river and to restore Palestinian water rights.

• The revival of the river requires that Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian decision-makers implement national policy strategies to manage their own demand for water, and to cooperate in the implementation of a comprehensive trans-boundary master plan for the river.

• This master plan should determine levels of water flow, set water quality standards, identify ways to eliminate pollution, define ecological corridors, support environmental rehabilitation programs, and advance plans for the development of eco-tourism in the Jordan Valley.

• Implementation of a master plan requires the establishment of a functioning trans-boundary commission to manage the valley’s water resources, resolve disputes, and strengthen the mechanisms of cooperation.
CREDITS

BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONS
All English-language excerpts from the Tanakh are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Bible (1985), with the exception of the quote (Ezekiel 47:6) on the front cover, which comes from the English Standard Version.

NOTE OF GRATITUDE
FoEME would like to recognize and thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Osprey Foundation for their support of the Jordan River Rehabilitation Project.

Additional thanks are due to the many international, regional, and local experts and faith leaders for their review and contribution to this series of publications. Specifically we would like to thank Rachel Havrelock, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA for her extensive editorial review, contributions and guidance throughout this process and Shahab Hussein, Secretary General of the Wembley Central Mosque in the UK and Ghazi Msharbash, Former Member of the Jordanian Parliament for their expert peer reviews. We are grateful to the many experts and religious leaders who volunteered to contribute time, essays, commentaries, and references for the toolkits including Prof. Mustafa Abu Sway, Dr. Husna Ahmed, Muhanned Khamees (Fatwa Department), Carol Barrow, Bart Campolo, Dr. John Chryssavgis, Abbott Gregory Collins, Faraz Khan, Rabbi Natan Levy, Rabbi Yonatan Neril, Assistant Prof. Christiana Peppard, Elizabeth Rabia Roberts, Rabbi David Rosen, Rabbi David Saperstein, David Shreeve, and Imam Zaid Shakir. Our toolkits are greatly enriched by their thoughtful contributions.

The views expressed are those of EcoPeace / FoEME and do not necessarily represent the views of our expert team, contributors, project advisors or reviewers.

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Many thanks to these photographers for their generous contribution of work to this campaign.

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ABOUT ECOPEACE / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST

EcoPeace/ Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a unique organization at the forefront of the environmental peacemaking movement. As a tri-lateral organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists, our primary objective is the promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region. FoEME has offices in Amman, Bethlehem, and Tel-Aviv.

For more information on FoEME or to download any of our publications please visit: www.foeme.org

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SUPPORTED BY
The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Osprey Foundation

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