



THE JORDAN RIVER AT ITS SOURCE IN ISRAEL. CREDIT: CORNUS

# THE LEGEND OF A LAKE

A TALE OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The draining of Israel's Hula Valley nearly destroyed a national ecological treasure but gave birth to the country's environmental movement

BY MITCH GINSBURG

There is a man in Kibbutz Hulata, down by the old shoreline, who knew the biblical waters of Merom better than anyone else still alive. Heading north through the panhandle of the Galilee on my way to meet him, I drive through the broad basin of the Hula Valley, flanked, to the east, by the yellow ridge of the Golan and, to the west, by the friendlier green hills of the Galilee.

For centuries the Jordan River and its northern tributaries flowed unchecked through Lebanon and down to the base of the inverted pear-shaped valley, where a basalt plug, formed by hardened volcanic lava, pooled the water into a placid, shallow lake known as the Hula. It was part of a 15,000-acre expanse of wetlands, an

**“This lake was very intimate, just three kilometers across. I remember how you could hear the eastern wind on the water before the storms and the way the long waves formed.”**

ecological treasure chest thick with tall papyrus and hundreds of species of migratory birds—white storks, Levant sparrowhawks, European white pelicans, honey buzzards and others—that stopped each year enroute between central Turkey and Mozambique.

I keep watch for any visible remnant of Lake Hula—called the “waters of Merom” in the Book of Joshua—but all I see is a wide-shouldered valley checkered with orderly orchards and fields. Behind them looms the snow-covered hump of Mount Hermon, the country’s tallest mountain. Only when I arrive at the kibbutz and meet Peter Merom, a hardy 87-year-old with a halo of gray hair and active eyes, can I imagine the Hula Valley of the past.

Merom, who as a young man named himself

after the lake, is perched on a couch in the living room of his home, a red-haired, attention-hungry cat on his lap. His thick voice, still carrying a trace of his native German, begins to bring the lake to life. “Each lake has its own character,” he says. “This lake was very intimate, just three kilometers across. I remember how you could hear the eastern wind on the water before the storms and the way the long waves formed.” Once upon a time the water would have been close enough to where we are sitting that we would have been able to hear it lapping on the shore, he tells me stoically.

Merom fled the Nazis in 1934 and arrived in the Hula Valley as a teenager. He spent the next 18 years paddling across the lake, checking fishing traps and collecting their bounty. His memories have a Huckleberry Finn feel to them. Whiskered catfish patrolled the shallow waters, kicking up clouds of mud with each flick of a tail. The kibbutz’s young men would go out on the water early and take turns working and napping in their boats, gossiping, and saving the best catches for their own lunch. They lived in huts that dotted the shore, alongside the Arab inhabitants, who had made the wetlands their home for many generations, fishing and harvesting papyrus.

The first modern Jews to return to the valley in order to “build and be built,” as the old Zionist adage would have it, came from Mezeritch, Poland, in 1883. Their first years in the settlement they named Yessod Hama’ala resembled the 10 plagues. They planted subsistence crops and prayed for rain watching as their ranks thinned. “Truthfully, those days were harsh and bitter, my friends, as hard as the splitting of the sea and as bitter as...well as bitter as, perhaps you’d like me to say death, but who is it that claims all death to be bitter?” Bila Lickerman, one of the original settlers, related to an archivist. “There simply was nothing—not for us or any Jew—to eat...above the skies were wide and blue; the mountains around us were tall and looming.”

Those who dwelled on the shores of the Hula suffered, in particular, from the Anopheles mosquito. Unaware of the old Safed saying, “He who sleeps a night is sick for a year, he who sleeps there a year is sick for life,” the





Peter Merom  
in his Kibbutz  
Hulata bungalow,  
surrounded by  
his photographs  
of Lake Hula  
before and after  
it was drained.





The Jordan River flows along its historic route through the north of Israel.

seven original families were plagued by malaria. The archives show that the Orensteins lost 12 of their 13 children; the Feldmans lost six of an apparent seven. Yet, somehow, through the philanthropy of Barons Hirsch and Rothschild and then, later, the sheer ardor and ideological zeal of subsequent waves of pioneers like Merom, Yessod Hama'ala survived.

"The night watchman used to come by every hour with a cup of water and a handful of Quinine pills," recalls Merom. He had four bouts with malaria, "and that was considered very fortunate."

Merom always carried his Rolleiflex camera with him in the boat, documenting the beauty of the lake and its inhabitants in enduringly vivid shots. His signature book, *The Song of A Dying Lake*, was published in 1960. "It's a book of poetry, love poetry," he says of the poignant black and white photos chronicling the life and demise of Lake Hula.

The final page reads: "There was a lake: its story is over."

"Today," Merom tells me, "I am all that remains of that lake."

LEGEND HAS IT THAT WHEN THE Romans lay siege to Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the brave sons of the Galilee, bound by patriotic duty, left the Hula Valley—"with its groves of fruit trees and ornamental trees, and its carpet of verdure"—and picked up arms. They fought along the spine of the country, trying to stop the Romans as they advanced north from Jerusalem to the Galilee. Preferring hunger and death to slavery, the last of the warriors took shelter back in the valley. Trapped, they prayed for the waters of Merom to rise. And rise they did. As the Romans fled, the warriors held out their arms and embraced the surging waters as they drowned. "And so the whole valley became a lake, one vast swamp, and out of it grew a dense tangle of plants, so thick that no one could make its way into their midst," wrote David Cohen in the 1954 Jewish National Fund and World Zionist Organization publication, *The Huleh: An Anthology*. "In this manner do they preserve the graves of the Galilean

warriors, waiting for the day when their descendents will come to drain the marshes of Hulata [sic]... to redeem its soil and to perpetuate the memory of the heroic fighters of yore."

This legend—conveying a Jewish history of agriculture, heroism and sovereignty—inspired

## Israeli engineers dynamited the volcanic plug at the foot of the lake, "freeing" the river on its run to Lake Kinneret and the Dead Sea.

many to dream of the day when the lake and swamps would be turned into a patchwork of fruit orchards and emerald fields. Even as Scottish explorer John MacGregor mapped the tributaries of the Jordan in 1860s, he longed to dry out the "Hooleh." So did Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid, one of Palestine's Muslim rulers, as well as the Palestine Land Development Company and the Jewish Agency when they bought the land in 1934.

The transformation of this 10-kilometer valley tucked between Israel's two northern neighbors was to serve as a symbol of the industriousness and technological mastery of the new Jewish state. The Jewish National Fund (JNF), established in 1901 to purchase land on which to resettle Jews, believed that the marshlands could be "redeemed" for agriculture and help feed the country's swelling population.

And so Israeli engineers steered the Jordan River into two drainage canals, dredged the bottom of the marshlands and dynamited the



volcanic basalt plug at the foot of the lake, “freeing” the river on its run to Lake Kinneret and the Dead Sea.

The swamp was vanquished. Lake Hula ceased to exist.

After seven years and 8.6 million dollars, the results were seen as a triumph. Fruit trees, wheat and corn were planted in this new Eden.

## Nature swiftly rejected this massive surgery: The peat soil decomposed and ignited fires.

The late geographer Yehuda Karmon, author of *The Northern Huleh Valley: Its Natural and Cultural Landscape*, marveled at the loveliness of the ruler-straight canals and the neatly parceled tracts of farmland.

“The story of the Huleh is one of the fascinating chapters of the Jewish struggle to reclaim and restore its homeland,” the JNF and the World Zionist Organization proudly proclaimed. “It is the saga of man’s battle with a swamp, a huge inundated area in the upper regions of the Jordan. It is the tale of that battle by pioneers, aided by science, to undo the ravages and devastation of nature, which in the course of two thousand years transformed a region into a center of malaria and desolation...It is not the first time that man has fought the swamp—but never with such thoroughness and efficiency.”

But nature swiftly rejected this massive surgery. The change in the landscape was immediate. Water-deprived flora and fauna died and decayed in the lakebed. Over time, the peat soil proved inadequate for agriculture. It decomposed, igniting underground fires. The topsoil turned to infertile dust and was swept across the fields by the wind. Finally, in the early

1990s, with the topsoil gone, the decomposing peat began to leach nitrates into Lake Kinneret, threatening the country’s drinking water.

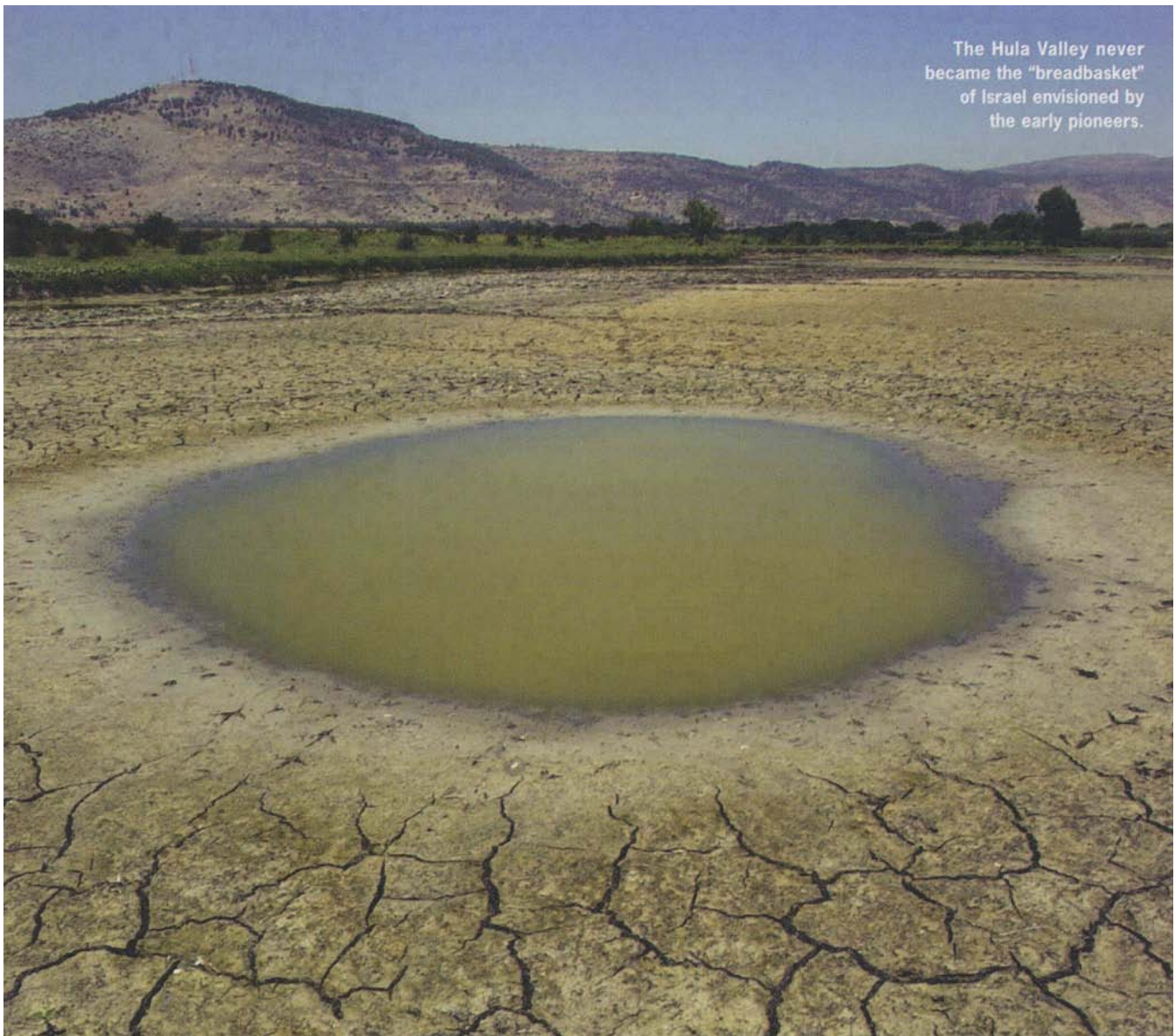
“In retrospect it all looks different,” says Yossi Mizrachi, 63, the former head of the Yessod Hama’ala Local Council, great-grandson of one of the first Jewish farmers in the valley, and owner of 85 acres of plum, pecan and pomegranate orchards. “Back then we thought we needed the land for immigration and agriculture. Today, it’s obvious it was an enormous mistake.”

To environmentalists, draining the Hula was beyond tragic. All told, 119 animal species were lost to the area. “Of course, it was an unmitigated disaster,” says Eilon Schwartz, director of Israel’s Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership, “but it is also a tale of hubris, aggression and domination over nature.”

THE IDEA OF SUCKING THE HULA DRY and prevailing over the inhospitable natural world was deeply rooted in Zionism and yet some claim, antithetical to Judaism’s long-standing beliefs about man’s relationship with nature. Modern Zionism—born of the European Enlightenment—believed that with Jewish ingenuity, the land of Israel, “forsaken” under Arab and Ottoman care, could be coaxed into full bloom and restored to its ancient glory.

The problem was that most of the first Jewish immigrants to Israel had little experience as stewards of land. For centuries, they had lived behind ghetto walls as teachers, merchants, tanners and tailors.

By the time of the Enlightenment, The Great Chain of Being—God, angels, people, lions, snakes, roses, weeds—had “been decapitated,” says Jeremy Benstein, the soft-spoken author of *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment*, as we talk in the kitchen of his Kiryat Tivon home. “With religion on the wane in the West, humans reigned supreme; the natural world was made into their kingdom, to be used as they pleased. Technological advance was seen as virtuous by definition.”



The Hula Valley never became the “breadbasket” of Israel envisioned by the early pioneers.

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“The entire motto of Zionism was to capture the desolate land,” Oz Almog, author of *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, later tells me. “The Jew needed to be normalized. Not as a luftmensch, but as a man who conquers and builds and uses the forces of modernity.” Scholar Edna Gorney believes that the drainage project was guided by the need to rid the Jewish man of his effeminate being. “People used to say that Jewish men menstruated,” says Gorney, who recently completed a doctoral thesis entitled *Divide and Conquer: An Eco-Feminist Look at the Hula*. “In order to alter that image the new Jews

developed a heterosexual relation to the land—they tried to tame it, dominate it, beautify it and control it.”

Beyond dominion and a belief in the powers of technology, there was also disappointment: the Jewish thirst for Zion had been kindled for thousands of years by poetic verses of prayer and scripture, leading the Jews to picture gold domes and sacred stones, not the swamp-and-desert reality of the Levant. The verdant lands described in the Bible had been sapped by overgrazing and deforestation.

Rachel Bluwstein, the celebrated early 20th-century poet, wrote “O my land, my mother,





These Eurasian cranes are among 500 million birds that rest in the Hula Valley each year as they migrate between Turkey and Mozambique.

why is your landscape so desolate and sad?" Chaim Nachman Bialik, regarded as Israel's national poet, felt the same: He composed some of the finest literary depictions of the Eastern European countryside, but once in Palestine, never again wrote about the natural world.

These attitudes toward the land were a product of modernity, not Judaism, says Benstein. While monotheism endowed Jews with "an exalted sense of human purpose," Judaism also placed checks on that entitlement. "The Genesis story is more than just God enabling Abraham to squeeze milk and honey from the land to his mouth," he says. Genesis tells the

story of Creation twice. In the first version, God commands man to "rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." But in the second version can be found the wellspring of the Bible's first environmental ethic: God breathes life into Adam and then commands him both to "till" the Garden of Eden's soil and to "keep it."

God also puts man in his place in the Book of Job: "Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars and spreads his wings towards the south? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?"

Beaten off the pedestal, Job cowers before God and responds: "I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not."

Benstein likes to say that Jewish law seeks not only today's holy environmental grail of sustainable development but also justice. For instance, the laws pertaining to *shmita*, that command us to leave the fields fallow once every seven years, ensure its fertility for coming generations and serve as a great societal equalizer. According to Gerald Blidstein, a Ben-Gurion University Professor of Jewish Law and 2006 winner of the Israel Prize, the *shmita* year eradicated private property. "Certainly everyone was allowed on each other's land," he says, "but my reading is that they also tore down their fences."

IT'S CLEAR THAT ALON TAL—A LEADING Israeli environmentalist and a Jewish National Fund board member—relishes recounting the tale of the motley crew of zoologists, biologists and nature lovers who dared to fight against what they considered the lunacy of draining the Hula and destroying a national treasure.

"The Hula Valley is not one of the cases when we can say 'We didn't know what we were losing,'" says Tal, a Ben-Gurion professor and author of *Pollution in the Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel*. "Those opposed to the draining founded the Nature Protection Committee, Israel's first environmental organization. They brought in Dutch experts with expertise in working with peat soil to examine the ecosystem. They said, 'You really should not drain the water. It's peat soil and it will collapse. It won't support agriculture.'" The JNF response? "'This is Zionist peat and Zionist peat won't sink! Zionist peat soil *will* support agriculture.' The Dutch had never before heard of soil with a political ideology!"

The JNF also turned a deaf ear to the argument that the wetlands had intrinsic value, in particular for migratory birds. The Galilee route is one of the few overland options for birds seeking to avoid flying over the saltwater deserts of the sea before hitting the arid regions of the Sahara.

"The attitude of the JNF was 'You guys are haters of Israel,'" says Tal with a laugh. "You want to look out for animals and not for the Jewish people."

The Nature Protection Committee—led by zoology professor Heinrich Mendelssohn, widely considered the father of environmental

**“This is Zionist peat and Zionist peat won't sink! Zionist peat soil will support agriculture.' The Dutch had never before heard of soil with a political ideology!”**

science in Israel—lost the battle. But its efforts led to a national first: the setting aside of land for the protection of nature.

The JNF's Yosef Weitz "bellowed at Mendelssohn when he asked for a small patch of wetlands to be reflooded, calling him an enemy of Israel," says Tal. Weitz chastised Mendelssohn for laying claim to land that could feed families, but then relented, authorizing the re-flooding 'to allow future generations to see how miserable it used to be here.'"

Thus was born the Hula Nature Reserve, setting the stage for Israel's conservation movement. In 1953, the Nature Protection Committee spawned the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), the country's largest membership organization. In turn, SPNI spawned a government nature reserve authority that over the next decades managed to set aside a significant chunk of

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**Eilon Schwartz, director of the Heschel Center, on the environmental group's urban rooftop garden in Tel Aviv. The plants are irrigated with run-off water from air conditioners.**

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Israel's land as open space. Although not always well-organized and chronically underfunded, Israel's early environmentalists continuously fought on behalf of their country's water, land and air—and sometimes won, managing, for example, to push through a law in the '70s requiring homes to install solar heating.

In the '90s, Israel's environmental movement experienced exponential growth. By decade's end, the umbrella coalition known as Life and Environment had over 90 member organizations, from tiny one-issue grassroots groups to others like the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, powerful legal advocate for change. "Slowly but surely, more citizens were waking up and smelling the coffee—

or the sulphur dioxide, if you will—and deciding they weren't going to take it anymore," says Tal.

Two tragedies forced the public to face up to serious environmental health concerns. On July 14, 1997, during the opening ceremonies of the international Maccabiah Games in Ramat Gan near Tel Aviv, Jewish athletes from 56 different nations strode over a new bridge across the shallow, murky waters of the Yarkon River. The support beams of the bridge gave way and the young athletes of the Australian delegation fell 25 feet to the water below. Only one died as a result of the fall but the toxic water killed three more and sickened dozens of others.

Then, in May 2000, the Israeli public was shocked by a report in the daily *Yediot Achronot* that skin cancer and other forms

of the deadly disease were plaguing a surprisingly high number of naval commandos. All of them had spent long hours training in the Kishon River, which had been tainted by effluents from Haifa's nearby petrochemical plants.

Today, more and more young Israelis are adopting green ways and there are at least one hundred environmental groups, crossing party and ethnic lines. Israelis have progressed to a deeper level of understanding, says Schwartz, one of Israel's foremost environmental thinkers. What he calls the "first model" of environmentalism is marked by its emphasis on nature preservation. The second focuses on the human impact on nature and, as a result, on public health, advocating for environmental protection out of rational self-interest. The third, explains

Schwartz, “understands that social and environmental issues are completely intertwined,” meaning that open spaces, birth rates, consumption, waste and “the massive motor of consumerism” are all part of the environment.

Widespread support for initiatives rooted in the third model has led to three recent major green victories. A dump near Tel Aviv, on which developers hoped to construct a 10,000-unit housing development, became Ayalon Park. Haifa’s Bat Galim coast, slated for a marina and hotels and almost paved, was saved. And Jerusalem’s Safdie plan, which sought to expand the city westward, was voted down. But probably the grandest victory of all has been the partial reclamation of the Hula Valley.

I START THE DAY AT THE HULA Nature Reserve, the one reluctantly reflooded by the JNF to remind people of how “miserable” the valley once was. David Ferro, the manager of the reserve, is waiting for me at the wheel of his green flatbed truck, wraparound shades perched on top of his head. He opens the gate to the off-limits part of the park, away from a well-trodden bird-watching path, and immediately we have crossed a threshold into wilderness.

It looks like paradise. Wild raspberry brambles line the side of the marshes. Lackadaisical water buffalo plow through the knee-high water. A flock of white pelicans ripple the placid pond with a hopping takeoff.

Ferro, a kibbutznik from the Golan Heights, looks content. “This is Africa,” he tells me, spreading his hands wide. “If there’s anything troubling me in life I come here to relax.”

I also want to see the new wetlands just north of here. In 1993, after realizing that the drainage project had been a terrible mistake, the JNF launched a new reclamation project in the hopes of undoing

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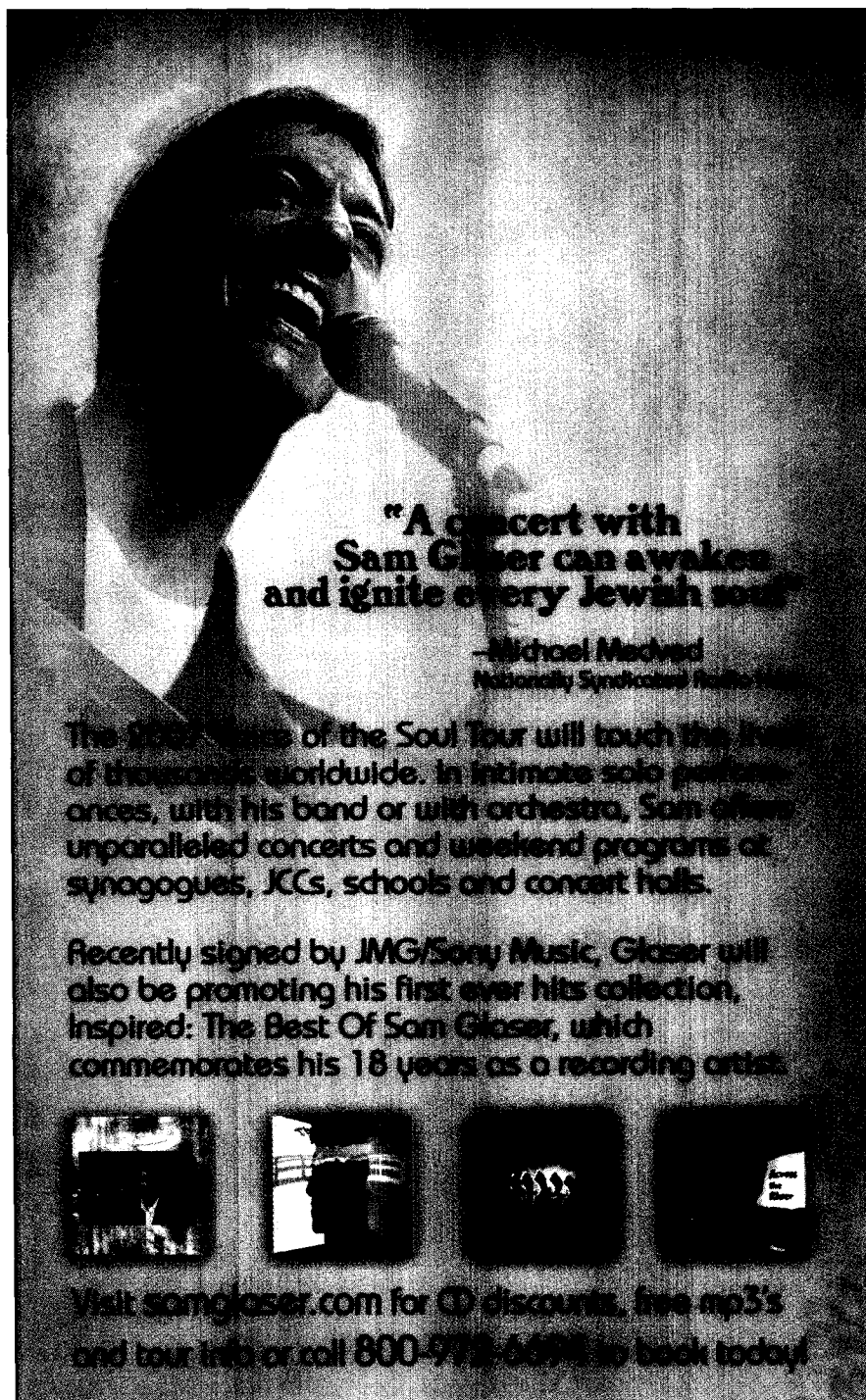
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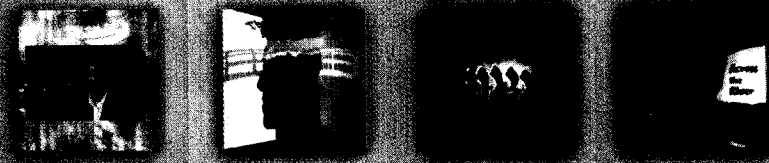


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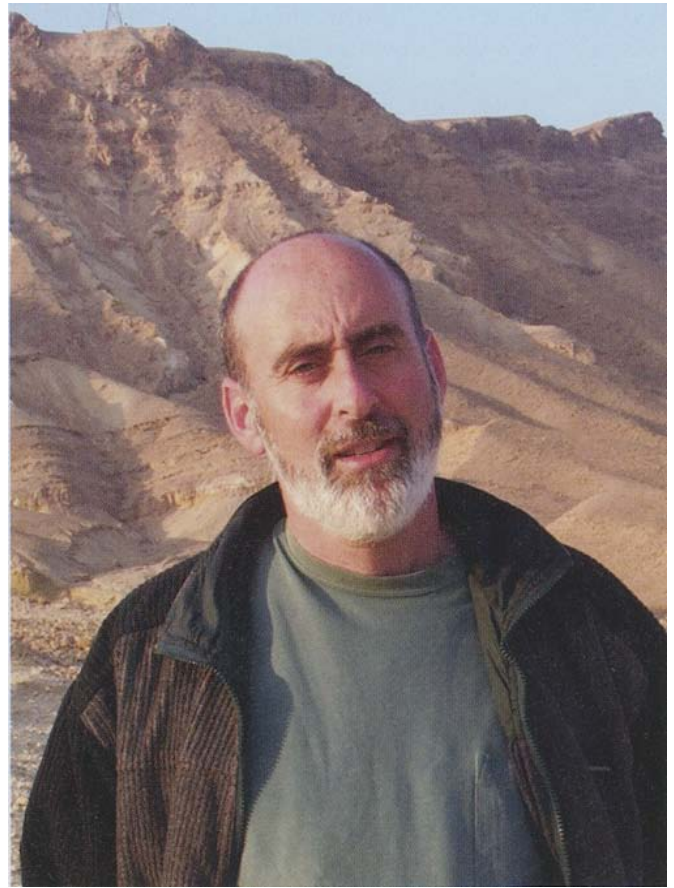
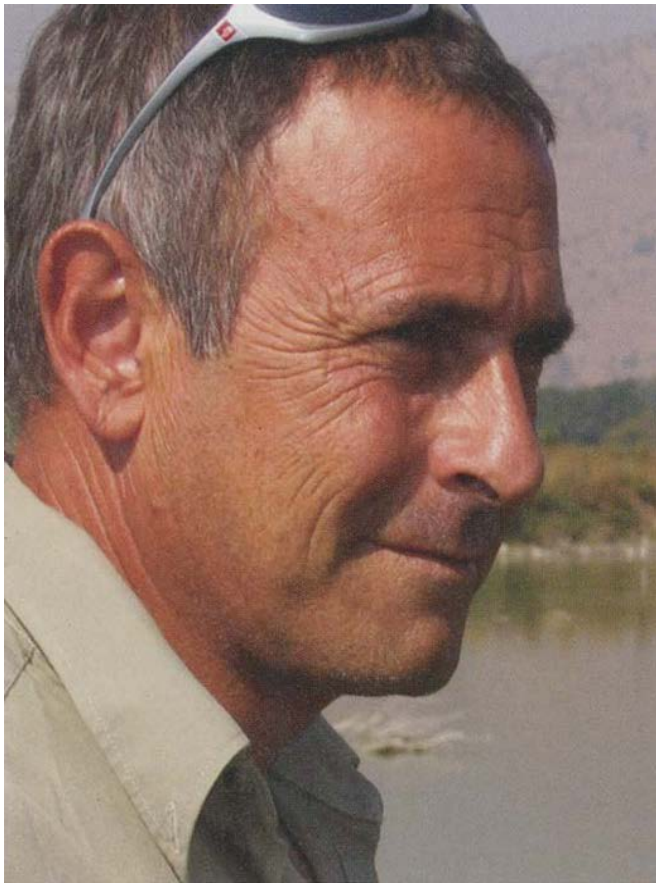
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**David Ferro, manager of the Hula Nature Reserve, and Alon Tal, author of *Pollution in the Promised Land: An Environmental History of Israel*.**

some of the damage. The historical route of the Jordan was restored and the center of the peatlands flooded, forming a mini-lake. The new lake, called the Agmon, should help stabilize the peat soil and raise the valley's depleted water table.

The reclamation was a joint effort of the JNF and environmentalists working with local farmers, who relinquished some of their land in the hopes of getting the birds out of their fields while also creating an eco-tourism area that could become a new source of revenue.

Omri Bonne, the scientist who heads JNF's Northern Region Land Development Authority, has offered to show me around. A long lanky man, Bonne is positioned behind a tripod and couldn't be more delighted by the overwhelming ornithological presence. Swirling packs of cranes, herons, and storks stalk about in the marsh beneath the lookout tower. An imperial eagle silently watches for prey.

"What we've done is create a delicate balance between agriculture, ecology and tourism," says Bonne animatedly. The farmers, who donate seed to feed the birds, have seen their yields increase although they are still struggling financially. As for the environmentalists, they're pleased that the wetlands now host some 500 million migrating birds a year of over 400 different species, more than in all of Europe. At the same time, the natural beauty of the landscape—along with canals for boating, picnic tables along riverbanks, hiking trails and swimming—has made the valley one of Israel's most popular tourist destinations.

Bonne hopes the reclamation project will lead to the protection of wetlands in 22 nations along the Great Rift Valley migration route, which stretches from Turkey to Mozambique. Earlier this year, the JNF and SPNI submitted a proposal to UNESCO that would string together

and protect all the wetlands on the birds' flyway as a World Heritage site. If the plan is approved, the Hula Valley's would be the largest of them all.

As for the past and all that was lost, Bonne does not fault his JNF predecessors. "Look," he says, still glued to his telescope. "Back then it was a trend. These days we've sobered up."

Still, only a small part of the valley has been restored to wetlands, a minor correction to the original surgery. "The Hula is a wonderful metaphor of coming full circle environmentally," says Alon Tal, who oversees the Hula Valley for the JNF. "But we'll never be able to return the valley to the magical descriptions we've heard about from old-timers." ☺