

# Save the Bedouins of the Negev from the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and the Israeli Government

By [Rabbi Arik Ascherman](#)

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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**Note from the editor of Tikkun.org:** Rabbi Arik Ascherman [pictured left] is one of our great contemporary heroes. His work to save the Israeli Bedouins from being obliterated by the Israel government deserves your full support.

Please read his call to you below! Standing up for the humanity of everyone on the planet is part of the goal of Tikkun magazine and our interfaith and secular-humanist welcoming [Network of Spiritual Progressives](#). To keep up with developments in the US and around the world, you are invited to receive (for FREE) updates through our Tikkun Daily Blog at [www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/join-tikkun-daily/](http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/join-tikkun-daily/)— **Rabbi Michael Lerner**

As you read this, JNF bulldozers are preparing the first stage of building the Jewish community of “Hiran” on the rubble of the Israeli Negev Bedouin community of “Umm Al-Hiran.” The government plans to expand the Yatir forest to overrun Atir. A week ago, the Israeli High Court removed the last legal hurdle preventing the immediate expulsion of over 1,000 men, women and children from their homes. The mayor of the artificial Bedouin township of Hura, where the Israeli government wishes to move them, says he has that Hura’s inadequate zoning plan leaves no place to put them.

You can act, and also read more background regarding Umm Al-Hiran and Atir, at [www.dontdemolish.com](http://www.dontdemolish.com). Here is some more general background about the Negev Bedouin.

While the world focuses on the Occupied Territories, the plight of Israel’s Bedouin citizens goes unnoticed, or is deemed an “internal matter.” For people of conscience, there can be no “internal matter,” and these approximately 250,000 Israeli citizens are also created in God’s Image.

Until 1948 the Negev served as home to 65,000-100,000 Bedouin who inhabited, worked and claimed ownership to somewhere between 2 and 3 million dunams of land (four dunam to an acre), [as documented by the pre-State Zionist movement in 1920](#) In almost every case, the proofs of ownership cited were traditional Bedouin documents based on their internal system of land ownership. Although the Ottomans, British, pre-State Zionist movement and the early State recognized these claims, today the State does not. Israeli courts do not accept Bedouin documents as proof of ownership. Whether one chooses to view this dispute as a boldfaced attempt to take over Bedouin lands, and/or as cultural imperialism unwilling to recognize the land ownership system of a traditional culture, the end result has been massive dispossession.

When I am in the Negev, I often reflect upon the Biblical story of Abraham and his nephew

Lot recounted in Genesis 13: 5-12. A conflict arises between Abraham's shepherds and Lot's shepherds because they were living together and there wasn't enough pasture. Abraham is the senior, and can clearly lay down the law. He doesn't. Rather, he bends over backwards to avoid conflict within the family. "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my shepherds and ours, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let us separate if you go north, I will go south, and if you go south, I will go north." We, the descendents of Abraham struggle mightily to claim the land he bequeathed us. Were we to exert a fraction of the efforts we invest in fighting over that physical inheritance in living up to the moral example Abraham bequeathed us, Israel/Palestine would look much different than it does today.

After the 1948 War only about 10% of the Bedouin population remained, living under a military regime until 1966. The Bedouin were moved out of the Western Negev in the 1950's, and into a triangle between Beersheva, Arad and Yeroham. In the 1960's-1980's Israel created 7 townships that radically alter the Bedouin lifestyle and destroy their social fabric. These townships have become magnets for poverty, crime, drugs and despair.

In the 1970's the State of Israel allowed the Bedouin to submit claims of land ownership. Perhaps there were those who thought that Bedouin know nothing about land ownership, and that the results would be so jumbled that it would be easy to dismiss them. The some 3,100 claims submitted fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. The Bedouin asserted they owned about 1,250,000 dunams of land. Of those, about 500,000 dunams of communal pastureland were immediately taken off the table. Subsequently somewhere between 200,000 to 350,000 dunams have been resolved in court or through arbitration. They Bedouin have always lost because their proofs of ownership aren't recognized. About 650,000 dunams of land remain unresolved.

Today approximately 120,000 live in the seven Bedouin townships. The rest of the community lives in 11 "recognized" villages and 35 "unrecognized" villages. While most of the unrecognized villages existed before the State of Israel, and the remainder are located where the State moved them, they are literally not on the map. For the most part they have no water, electricity, schools or master building plans allowing them to build legally. Over 1,000 homes are demolished every year. Crops are destroyed. When the village Khassim Zannah went to court to stop a planned highway from destroying it, the State's response was "What village? There is no village there."

A series of plans of how to deal with the Bedouin have been promulgated since 2008. The latest was the Begin Bill, that we believe would have led to the demolition of tens of villages, the transfer of some 40,000 additional Bedouin into the townships, and the loss of most of their remaining lands. It was frozen in 2013 not only because the Bedouin and their supporters opposed it, but because the Israeli right thought it to be too generous!

Subsequently, the Israeli government has been implementing elements of the Begin Bill without legislation. Over 1,000 Bedouin homes are demolished yearly, even as the State plans tens of new Jewish communities in the Negev and intends to move most of Israel's army bases there.

"Hiran" is one of ten new planned Jewish communities that are part of the "Arad Area Development Plan." It is the first that was literally planned on the rubble of an existing Bedouin community, but not the only one. Again, you can find more information about Umm

Al-Hiran and Atir, and send a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu, at [www.dontdemolish.com](http://www.dontdemolish.com).

The tensions created by this injustice are harmful to both the Jewish and Bedouin residents of the Negev. Mistreatment also sends a message to Palestinians that they have nothing to expect from Israel if this is the way Israel treats her own citizens. There is another way. An Israeli television movie documented the identification of Bedouin with the State in the mostly recognized villages in northern Israel, versus the anger and rage in the Negev. [You can click here for a brief clip from the movie with subtitles](#)

[In 2013, Rabbis For Human Rights conducted a poll](#) demonstrating showing that 90% of Israeli Jews subscribe to the statement that “The Bedouin are taking over the Negev.” Some 70% believed that the Bedouin claimed at least 25% of the Negev. The median was 43/9%. When informed that if remaining Bedouin land claims were recognized and honored, they come to only 5.4% of the Negev, the majority said, “We are not sure we believe you, because that is not what we have heard in the media. However, if that is the case, that sounds fair.”

Have we Israelis all too often in our short history been oppressors, transferors and dispossessors? Sadly, yes. Is it who we are in our souls? No. This poll is one of the pieces of evidence that gives me hope, and allows me to maintain my faith in the goodness and decency of my fellow Israelis, even as my job is to deal on a daily basis with the darkest corners of the society I am a part of and the people I love. It teaches me that our job is not to rub the nose of the naughty puppy in the mess they have made, but to hold up a mirror and say, “We know that you are good and decent people striving to do justly. However, you need to look in the mirror, in order to get back on track.” Our word in Hebrew for prayer is “tefillah,” a reflexive verb meaning to “judge one’s self.” Created in God’s Image, God is in the mirror into which we gaze in order to look deeply into ourselves, and understand what we must do in order to return to our highest and truest selves. *Tikkun Olam* is partnering with God by helping to hold up the mirror.

[Please help hold up the mirror by sending a letter now.](#) You can use the letter we’ve prepared at [www.dontdemolish.com](http://www.dontdemolish.com)

**For more information, please go to the [Bedouin](#) section on the RHR website**

**[Or to the website of the Negev Coexistence Forum](#)**

***Rabbi Arik Ascherman** is the President and Senior Rabbi of Rabbis For Human Rights. He is currently on trial for standing with the “unrecognized” village of El-Araqib when Israeli forces the demolished structures built inside their cemetery fence in June 2014, because the cemetery perimeter had been sacrosanct during the tens of previous demolitions.*

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Articles by: **Rabbi Arik  
Ascherman**

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