

As the fortunes of the cultivators of the soil varied in Palestine so did the history of its forests. Among the catastrophes still remembered are the destruction of the forests covering the hills near Jerusalem by the soldiers of Titus just before the city itself fell and the temple was destroyed. Then the crusaders hacked down the fine oak woods that grew between Jaffa and Nablus. Some of the earlier Turkish invaders, pushed westward from beyond the Caspian Sea by the restless Mongols, burnt over the whole of Palestine in the 13th century. Napoleon in his day set the torch to whatever grew on the plain of Sharon. More trees were lost three decades later during the effort to contain an Egyptian revolt against the Ottoman sultan. What escaped the attention of invading armies or of browsing goats or of the raiding herdsmen, fell victim to local cultivators whose fields had become exhausted and who needed more land in order to live, and so the last forest groves were sacrificed, although some orange and olive orchards continued to flourish and were carefully tended throughout all the troubles of the later days.

Inevitably, during the centuries while Palestine's impoverished soil was being washed down unchecked from the denuded hills by the winter rains, and while sand dunes, blown by the vagrant winds, were encroaching on the plains, the once teeming population declined. Mr. Ben Gurion's phrase "the turning back of nature" may thus refer properly not only to what the people of Israel are now doing for their land, from Galilee in the north to the Negev in the south, but also, by implication, to the life-giving influence of a restored soil on the people who care for that soil. There is a natural and inevitable connection between the two. The soil gives back life to those who tend it well.

The dual task of reclaiming a land placed as Israel is placed today and of restoring a dispersed people to normal living involves both economic and what one might describe as purely human problems of such extreme difficulty that responsibility for dealing with the issues concerned could hardly have been assumed by present-day Jewish leaders were it not for the intensity of the Jewish feeling of revolt against cruelty and discrimination suffered in Europe since medieval times. That revolt is an expression of the stubborn hope in adversity, of that inflexible determination to survive which has typified Jewish life and inspired Jewish legend.

You recall perhaps the story that in the latter days the Almighty, being discouraged by the wickedness of mankind, decided to send a new and more destructive flood to put an end to what seemed after all to have been an unsuccessful experiment in the creative field. This time there would be no Noah and there would be no ark. There were, however, three good men in the world whom God wished to warn - a Moslem, a Christian and a Jew. To them in turn he sent his angel bearing the message that floods were about to descend and that even the highest mountains would soon be covered by deep waters. The Moslem addressed himself to prayer and the Christian to confessing his sins. The venerable Jew, however, stroked his beard and said reflectively to his heavenly visitant, "Very interesting indeed! But is it not going to be something of a problem to find a way of surviving under thirty fathoms of water?"