

Our values, our homes

• JESSICA MONTELL

The Jordan Valley comprises over one quarter of the land area of the West Bank. There are currently 39 Israeli settlements there, including nine unauthorized outposts.

Some Israeli politicians claim the Jordan Valley is essential for national security, and are calling for a permanent Israeli presence or even annexing this area. Others dispute the security claims regarding the Jordan Valley. What is not in dispute, however, is that the Jordan Valley is also home to some 58,000 Palestinians.

This is not only a political and diplomatic issue. It is also a legal and humanitarian issue – and I see it as a test of our basic values.

My son is learning the Book of Samuel in his Bible class at school. As I listen to him read the story of the poor man's lamb, I cannot help but think of the shepherds of the Jordan Valley:

"The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little lamb which he bought and nourished... Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock to prepare for the traveler; rather he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." (II Samuel 12:2-3)

What is the lesson my son should learn from this story? In my family and my neighborhood, we have so much to be thankful for. We live in a well-heated apartment. Our refrigerator is full. We lack for nothing. And I know that just a few miles down the road, families live in a completely different reality.

Mushakhis Bani Maniya is a mother of seven children who lives in a small shepherding community in the Jordan Valley. In January, the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria demolished all structures in the community. Bani Maniya described her reality to B'Tselem:

"We have been living in Khirbet Ein Karzaliya for 25 years," she says. "Life here is very hard; there are no paved roads, electricity and other services. We keep on living here because we have flocks of sheep that need to graze.

"A large force of the Israeli military came with bulldozers and demolished all of our structures. We were left without any shelter. The children were exposed to the elements. Everything was ruined. It was an awful sight. The Red Cross gave us small tents and we put them up.

"Early this morning, soldiers came and dismantled even the six tents we got from the Red Cross. Again, we set up the sheep-pens and took the animals out to graze. Again we have no shelter. It's winter and we're out in the open, exposed to the elements.

"We have nowhere else to live. We have nowhere to go. So despite it all, this morning I lit the fire, kneaded

dough and baked bread and cooked for my children."

There are various legal justifications for these demolitions. Ein Karzaliya and other communities are located in areas that have been declared military firing zones. Other Palestinian communities are threatened with demolition because they were built without permits. In fact, it is impossible to receive building permits in these communities, as the civil administration does not recognize most of them, and has not approved master plans for them. Even when Palestinians build on land that they own, their homes are threatened with demolition.

Over the past year, there has been an alarming increase in Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes. In 2013, Israel demolished 173 Palestinian homes in the West Bank and another 72 in east Jerusalem. (In addition to these residential structures, Israeli authorities demolished other structures.) This is almost twice as many demolitions as it carried out in 2012. The Jordan Valley has been especially hard-hit by demolitions. In January alone, the Israeli military destroyed 27 homes there.

At the end of the month, the military destroyed the whole community of Khirbet Umm al-Jamal, home to 61 people, in the northern Jordan Valley. Fatme Ka'abneh, a 67-year-old widow, describes what happened:

"The Israeli authorities came in the morning with bulldozers, and demolished and destroyed everything here. I begged them to leave my home alone, the home of my small grandchildren, and to not demolish the pen of the young lambs. I also begged my sons not to resist the demolitions. I was afraid the army would hurt them or would take them to jail. Nothing helped and they demolished everything, even the cooking oven."

"We now live outdoors, with no shel-

ter," Ka'abneh continued. "I've slept two nights out in the open. I put mattresses on the ground and we covered ourselves with whatever we had. We lit a fire but I swear to God it was not enough to warm us.

"I feel like our bodies can't rest. Everything we own is here in piles. We cannot relax. We are constantly afraid the army will come back and destroy everything.

"We are shepherds and we have nowhere else to go. We have not harmed anyone."

Whatever the legal pretext, these demolitions are part of Israel's broader policies in Area C of the West Bank. This is the 60 percent of the West Bank where Israel controls all planning and construction. Israel's policy is to severely restrict Palestinian development in these areas, while at the same time investing massive resources to promote settlement expansion. Fully 88% of the Jordan Valley is defined as Area C, and 10,000 Palestinians live in this area.

Whatever the future status of this territory, there is no debate that Israel currently controls the Jordan Valley. With this control must come legal responsibility for the welfare of the people living there. Israel must immediately halt all demolitions, but this is not the extent of its obligations. Israel is legally obligated to ensure that these people have the ability to properly plan their communities, to develop and build, not only to survive but to thrive.

The theoretical debate about the future of the Jordan Valley has a tangible effect on the ground, with families spending the winter without shelter. Every elementary schoolchild learning the Book of Samuel can tell you that it is blatantly unjust for us, who live in comfort, to deprive these families of the meager shelter they have. ■

The writer is executive director of B'Tselem: the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.



PALESTINIAN SHEPHERDS walk their sheep near Massua, a Jewish settlement in the Jordan Valley. (Reuters)