



# Sedek

A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba

Towards return  
of Palestinian refugees

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## COUNTER-MAPPING RETURN

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Image Strips: Nimrod Zin





—> What will the return look like? How many new housing units will be built? What will the shared Israeli-Palestinian space be like? How will industrial and agricultural regions be allocated? What infrastructure will be required for towns and villages? What principles will govern movement throughout the area?

These and other questions were discussed in *Zochrot's* 2010 summer workshop, **Counter-mapping: Thinking about the Return**. Participants included *Zochrot* volunteer activists – Israeli Jews and Palestinians, members of the organization's directorate, and representatives from the "Committee of Miska expellees" living today in Tira. During the workshop we examined various issues connected to the return of refugees and expellees and formulated proposals conceptualizing the territorial implications of the return in order to develop a schematic outline for, and suggest a variety of, possible spatial scenarios of return. The mapping group defined the workshop's guiding assumptions, investigated the problems arising from them, formulated the questions and identified common goals. We sought a way back to the village of Miska and its surroundings: a village that had been erased from the map as a result of ongoing uprooting, expulsion and

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destruction, but whose contours still exist on the ground and continue to be present in the daily lives of its former inhabitants and in the memories of the old-time Jewish residents of the area.

"Counter-mapping" is a general term for ways of working with maps in cooperation with community members. Researchers and social movements use maps (not necessarily cartographically) to connect communities, information and ecological applications; as a negotiating tool between communities and outside bodies (such as planning groups, state agencies and economic organizations); as a means to document the connections among space, culture and time; and to develop regional planning models for different communities. The method of counter-mapping is also sometimes employed in negotiations over borders and territorial delimitations (Fox 1998; Peluso 1995; Wainwright & Bryan 2009). The common starting assumption for all these is that the map provides actual proof of spatial presence and can therefore be used by the community in its struggle to retain its lands and its right to them. The counter-mapping process draws inspiration from a number of contemporary social science research practices ("participatory action research" in particular),<sup>1</sup> and is also connected to the

<sup>1</sup> "Participatory Action Research (PAR)" is an overall term for a variety of methods developed by researchers, beginning in the 1970s and inspired by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), the founder of social psychology. They are based on an understanding that social science research must be conducted in cooperation with the community and its representatives in order to achieve its goal of social and political change. The purpose of this method is to eliminate the distinction between "researcher" and "subject" and anchor research in the needs of the community as a whole and in the knowledge of the participant researchers.



Claire: Instead of seeing it as a demographic threat we need to see this as a chance.



And instead of having children making parcels for soldiers.



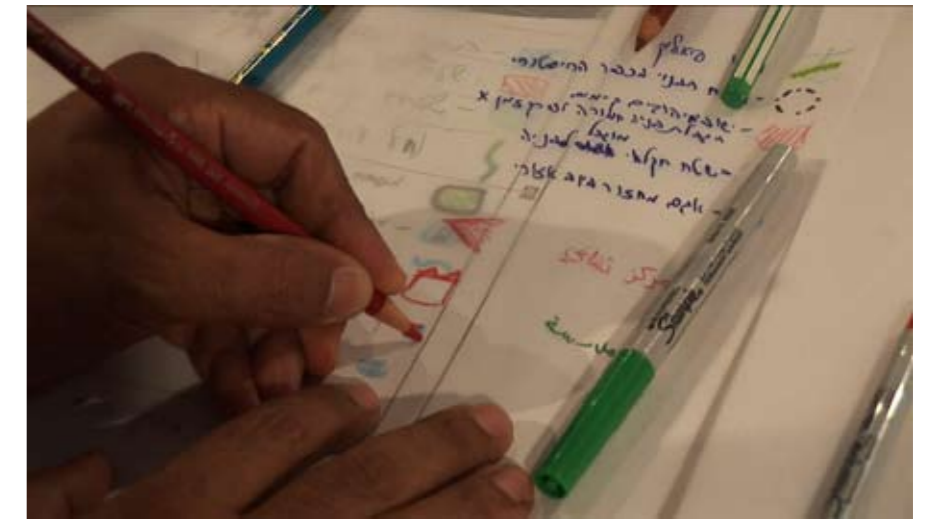
They would make "welcome back" parcels for the returning Palestinians.

development of place-based social movements working on the ground to achieve social-environmental justice. The counter-mapping process is also connected to the geographical social revolution of the 1970s, extending it to include critical-radical discourse. This process includes development of the field of "critical cartography," critical thinking about cartographic methods as representations of society's existing power relations: maps not only reflect spatial-geographic knowledge, but also touch implicitly on a variety of political, social, cultural and historical issues. The relatively wide acceptance of this method is connected to the increased accessibility of

technologies of mapping and spatial location such as GPS, web mapping and satellite photographs available through Google Earth. These technologies remove “oversight” from the sole control of authoritative professionals, planners, the military and the government and allow broad sectors of the population to read and understand maps and use them to create their own space (Crampton & Krygier 2006; Perkins 2003; Wood 1992).



of return to investigate the connection between territory and identity, and re-situate facts “on the map” again. Counter-mapping also involves an act of resistance: it creates new maps as alternatives to those that exist and as documents intended to promote social and political goals.



Fadi: We will build the roads in the center of the village from the stones of the village remains.



Amir: Tell me, would Jews be able to live in Miska?



Fadi: Not at the first stage.



We should not legitimize the place as Arab-Jewish.



You'll see.

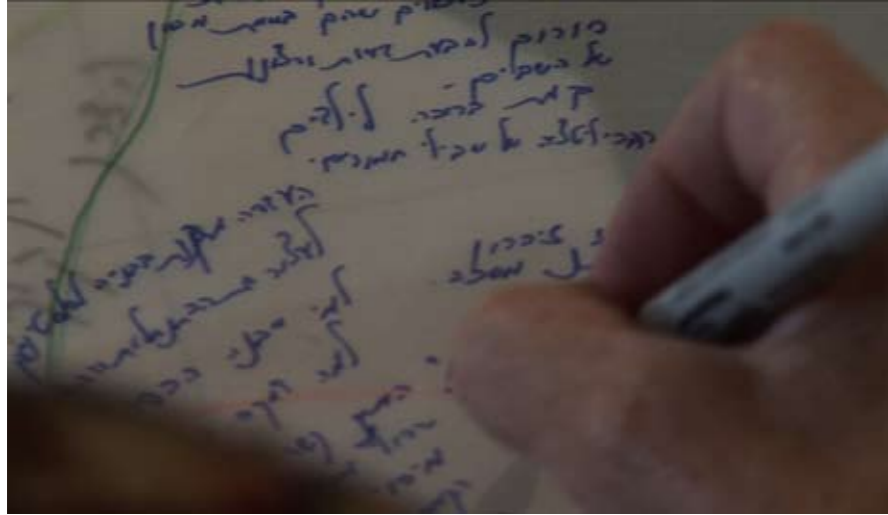


At a later stage this could happen on its own.

During the “Counter-mapping: Thinking about the Return” workshop, we used counter-mapping as a dialectical action strategy that views official maps as agents of power and information and as sites representing sovereign policy committed to recreating and strengthening the existing order – and as challengers of that status. Counter-mapping activities utilize methods of representing (and creating) official space – as well as intervening in and criticizing them – in order to establish the maps as critical frameworks open to reconsideration. Our reconsideration of the maps of Miska was intended to make visible processes of exclusion and erasure, use the idea

#### HOW DO MAPS HELP US THINK ABOUT THE RETURN?

Experience has shown that reference to the right of return, as a theoretical concept rather than a practical plan of action, is met with anger, violence, and fear – fear that is often a result of the inability to imagine how the actual implementation of the right of return would appear and to see its inherent potential. I argue that this inability is connected to the absence of a “geographical imagination,” an inability to conceptualize the physical environment, its scale, its configuration, and the social dynamics that the



return will create. David Harvey discusses this idea in his article, “The Sociological and Geographical Imagination” (2005). Harvey, a theorist and social geographer writing from a Marxist perspective, argues that the geographical imagination makes possible the expansion of the “sociological imagination” (a concept formulated by the sociologist C. Wright Mills) toward “spatial consciousness.” The power of geographical imagination



Rula: The anger is there, it would be dishonest to ask for no anger to be there.



But then, how could it be productive?



There has to be a willingness and gentleness in working with the plans and the maps.

permits discussing questions of identity, place, and territory in a way that connects them to material processes. The geographical imagination, moreover, moves between past and future: “Marxist time” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991) comes into play here, filling physical space with narratives of achronological memory, a memory of time-and-place embedded in existing processes while creating the processes that will structure space in the future. The same is true of the idea of return – an activity moving on an achronological dimension between an actual historical space and the possibility of a return to a future place.

2 An additional dialectical space opens up here between the object and the process. This space continues the discussion of the participation of representational regimes (expressed, in part, in the drawing of maps) in the creation of an occupied space, polarized in national, social and physical terms and connected to the implantation of the market logic of late capitalism. By not differentiating between the map as object and the process of mapping and through political action in both these areas, we undermine the representational process itself and the reproduction of its “truths.” Critical activity carried out in the space between representation and production gives us the opportunity to expand the power of collective political imagination.



The workshop proposed giving up for now an abstract approach to the return. Instead, we carefully studied historical maps and the actual configuration of the existing space to develop a specific, targeted action plan for a return to the Miska region. We did not intend to simplify complicated political ideas, but to represent them in a manner that would embody a variety of potential implementations and would examine the



Ismat: We could have the houses on a self-built system.



From the outside they would all look the same, and on the inside have everybody do it as they like.



In any case, only those returning in practice would get a house.

possibility of using visual imagery – the map – and the power of spatial-political imagination to create a shared space for the future.<sup>2</sup>

In preparation for doing so, we formulated four basic assumptions: The maps and mapping exercises are experimental and reflect only the ideas of the members of the mapping group (in order to avoid claiming to represent those uprooted from Miska who are now part of the Palestinian diaspora and in refugee camps, or to pretend to speak for the Israeli-Jewish public).

We are planning for the return of all the refugees and expellees.

The plan does not involve demolition of what currently exists, or the recreation of what existed in the past. In other words, “no building will be destroyed.” We examined current aerial photographs of the area and discovered that Miska is an “easy” case study because the moshavim Mishmeret and Sde Warburg and Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh were established on its agricultural land after most of the village had been demolished and a eucalyptus grove planted in its center.

We recognize that thinking at the local level about the return cannot be separated from thinking about it at the broader political level; we assume, however, that broader issues of identification and power will also find expression on a smaller scale in the specific local case. Discourse focused on a space delimited by borders at the local level, moreover, rather than by the borders of a sovereign state, allows us to discuss the practical aspects of creating common space based on the daily life of the individual in the community and on housing, employment and movement through territory. All these can serve as the basis for wider understanding and a greater range of activities.

During the three days of the workshop, we conducted a series of mapping exercises to orient ourselves in time and space, including reviewing

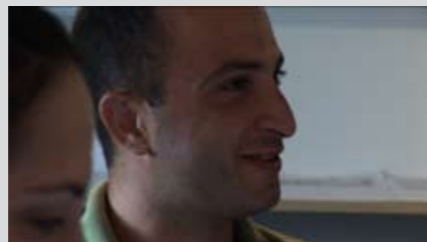
3 For a discussion of the broader aspects of the role of utopian discourse as an instrument of change, cf. “Y Utopia?,” Block, No. 3, Winter 2006 [Hebrew]

locations in the territory), preservation and restoration of the remains of the former village, housing, agriculture and industry. We interrupted each stage of the planning process for a reflexive discussion during which we examined our language, our representational methods, our assumptions, and the additional questions that were raised. The planning groups used various information layers, maps, and plans in order to negotiate in a manner simulating the dominant territorial institutional systems while also being critical of them.

The main question we asked was, “What will the return of refugees actually look like on the ground?” Our attempt to answer this question was an exercise in the practical space of utopia:<sup>3</sup> we looked at the future in order to create the space for a discourse of change in the present as part of a strategy of movement through time and space in opposition to segregation and the ongoing policy of occupation. We then formulated a territorial program for return and together considered how to represent the ideas proposed on the new maps we created. We focused on planning a mixed space amenable to change; the maps we created reflect a variety of spatial scenarios and alternative models for planning the common space and making possible the practical return to Miska and its surroundings. The ideas, maps and questions have their source in the development of the wealth of ideas and common knowledge made possible primarily through joint discussions that remained sensitive to the shared territory and fate.



Matan: I imagine a kind of a huge tent where the Miska refugees will meet for a rebuilding Miska gathering.



Fadi: Like in Basel.



Matan: If you insist on returning to the Zionist terminology.

historical maps of the area and marking on the map itself the “mental maps” of each of the participants in order to create a shared collective memory. We then divided into groups to plan the existing and the future space: movement and connections (development of an extensive infrastructure permitting movement and connections between communities and



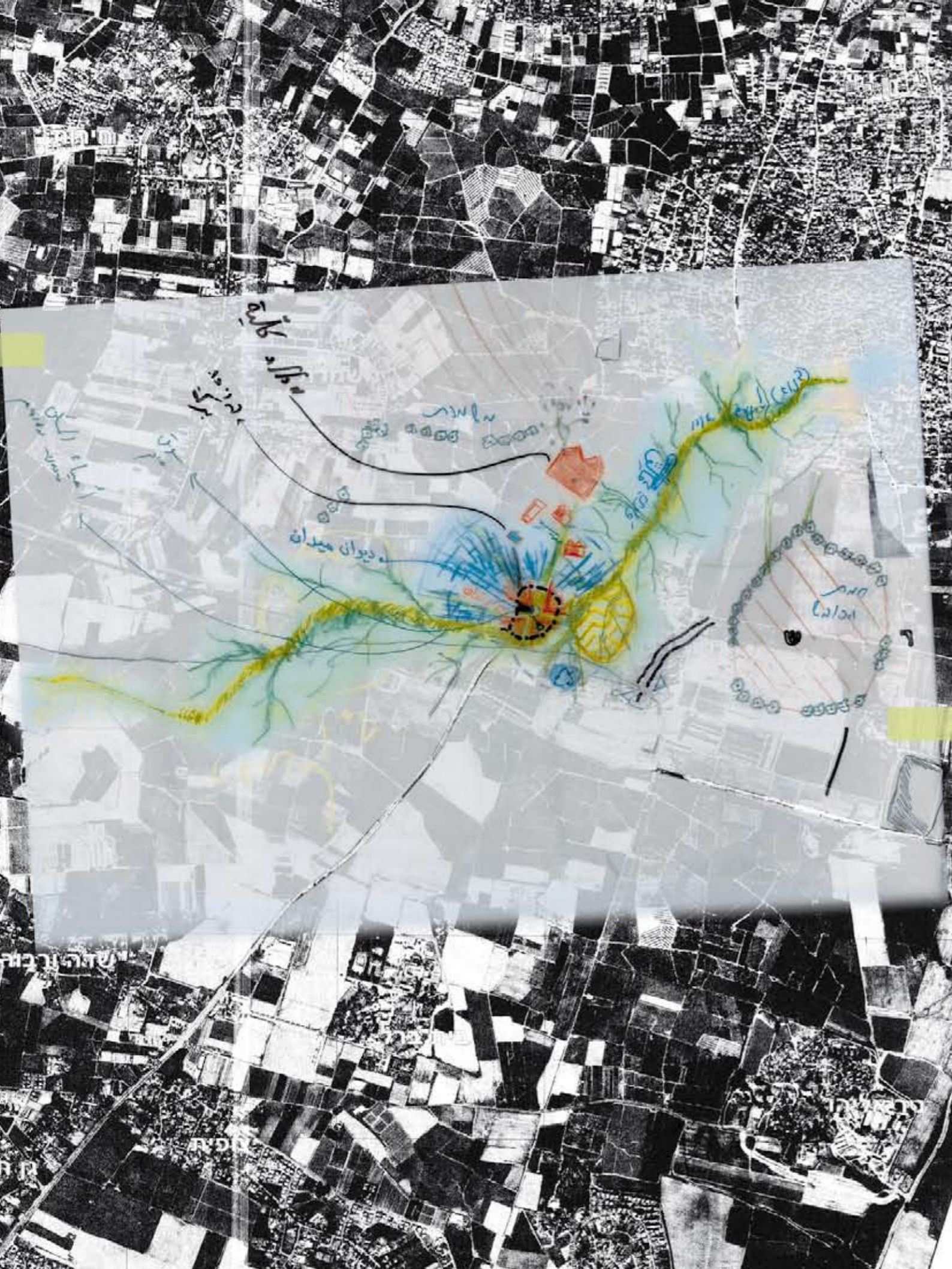
Masha: We need to think of how to make return a strategy.














that will not recreate the same existing rhetoric,



but that will still be decisive and effective.



**Legend:**

- 
Poleg Creek (Wadi Falek)
- 
Preservation and reconstruction of the historical village
- 
Existing Jewish-Israeli settlement indicating a strict urban growth boundary (limit sprawl)
- 
Agricultural land with strict building limits
- 
Wastewater (sewage) recycling pool
- 
Village gateway - Commercial-Light Industrial Zone (CM) Tourist Commercial Zone (CT)
- 
Boulevards / mixed use
- 
Regional cultural institutions (regional research center, community center, museum, elementary school, high school, playground, swimming pool, public diwan, farmers' market, clinic, theater hall)
- 
Reconstruction of Miska's cultural and educational institutions
- 
Regional educational institutions
- 
Religious institutions (mosque)
- 
Housing



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